

Author • Yuishi Artist • Kagachisaku

volume

3

An Introvert's

HOOKUP HICCUPS:

This **GYARU** Is Head Over Heels for Me!



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Prologue: The Morning After

How do people react when something unexpected happens? I bet it varies from person to person. One person might freeze and struggle to say anything; another might scream out loud. Then there's the type of person who starts blabbering and just can't stop. There have to be all kinds of people.

But which one was I? I supposed I was the type who'd freeze and struggle to react. Even when I'd overheard Nanami-san and her friends talking on that fateful day, all I could do was stand there and listen. That's what I was thinking, anyway, as I gazed at Nanami-san's face as she slept.

Just so there's no confusion: I didn't sleep with her or anything. I'd slept in a different room, and I just now came in to wake her up. Apparently, Nanami-san was usually awake by now, but she was taking way longer than usual to wake up, perhaps because of all the commotion yesterday. That's why I'd been assigned the task of waking her.

But how would she react when she did wake up? I was kind of scared by the thought but also a little curious.

"Mnngh... Huh?"

As I was still wondering, Nanami-san let out an adorable sigh and slowly opened her eyes. It seemed she'd woken before I could even say anything to her. It was uncanny, really, for her to wake up just as I was thinking I wished I could see it.

Nanami-san's eyelids began to flutter open—and froze halfway.

"Good morning, Nanami-san," I said.

Seeing me, Nanami-san stopped any and all movement and froze in place. Then, after a long moment of silence, she finally let out a confused "Huh?" By the looks of things, she was the same type of person as me—she was frozen, unsure what to say too.

Apparently, her brain hadn't quite caught up to the situation. With her eyes locked with mine, she remained wrapped in her blankets and didn't move an inch. It was almost as if she were imitating a pose from a game.

Her hands still grasping the blanket, Nanami-san slowly sat up while keeping her body covered. Was she feeling chilly? She looked around from left to right and then, tilting her head, returned her gaze to me. "Where am I?" she asked.

“Uh, the study in your house,” I said.

It seemed she was still half asleep and confused by not having woken up in her own room. I sat down next to her in an effort to reassure her and waited for her to say more.

“Why am I sleeping here? Oh, you stayed over at our house last night, right? We were gonna chat before bed, but I can’t really remember... Hold on.” Suddenly, her eyes widened. “Where did you sleep?”

Apparently, she’d completely forgotten what had happened the night before. *Hmm, how much should I tell her? It’s about her, so I guess I should tell her everything.*

“Don’t you remember, Nanami-san? Yesterday, you...”

With that, I proceeded to explain what had happened that night. Nanami-san immediately turned red and slid back into the futon as if to hide. She formed a little steamed bun with herself as the filling.

“Oh no... Did I really do that? That’s so embarrassing.”

She poked her head out of the sheets, evolving into a turtle. Then she poked her hands out as well and began rubbing her eyes like a cat. From a steamed bun, to a turtle, to a cat—her evolution knew no bounds!



With Nanami-san now awake, I decided to lay down next to her. Adjusting myself so that we were at eye level, I turned my gaze to her as she continued looking bashful.

“Do you really not remember what you did?”

“No, I don’t. Wait, I sort of remember. Maybe.”

Hearing that, I felt my heart skip a beat. *So she does sort of remember. Wait, she doesn’t remember what I did to her, does she? No way. She was asleep, so she couldn’t have noticed. I’m pretty sure I have nothing to worry about.*

My sense of guilt at the possibility of having done something wrong was building. *Should I tell her now? Should I tell her I kissed her on the forehead? Ha, as if. I can’t do that, but I also feel like maybe I should. What am I supposed to do?*

As I lay there conflicted, Nanami-san whispered softly, “I see. Then I guess we didn’t get to chat, huh? I’m sorry.”

“Please don’t apologize. You had no control over it. I mean, who would’ve guessed?”

Who *could’ve* guessed that a drunk Nanami-san would burst into the room, especially dressed like *that*? I deserved a pat on the back for my ability to keep my head and hold myself back throughout the situation. I mean, I had kissed her on the forehead, but surely that still counted as holding back.

“Hmm. It’d be nice if you could sleep over tonight too,” Nanami-san said.

“You know that won’t work. Everyone was here yesterday, and it was kind of a special situation. Plus I can’t be a bother for so many nights in a row.”

“Damn. I guess you’re right. Ugh, why did I end up falling asleep? I wanted to talk to you about what you thought of the date and where you wanted to go for our next one and stuff like that!”

She had probably asked to talk knowing full well that it wasn’t going to happen, but judging by the tinge of sadness in her voice, her regret was totally genuine.

Pouting, Nanami-san got up and did a big stretch. It was then that the blanket that had been covering her lost its battle against gravity and slid off of her. Still lying down, I followed her with my gaze and saw her look down at herself and freeze. Yeeeah, it’s not like I intended on looking, but the view from that angle really was something else. Talk about a discovery.

“Why am I dressed like this?!” she yelled, quickly scooping up the fallen blanket and using it to hide herself. So much for remembering what had happened last night. “No wonder it felt chilly...”

“You came in wearing that. Don’t you remember?”

“Seriously? Did I do something weird? I didn’t say anything weird, did I?”

Instead of worrying about her own actions, why wasn’t she worrying about *me* doing something weird to *her*? Could I take that to mean that she trusted me? Nanami-san held her head in her hands, trying desperately to recall her own actions.

“It’s okay, nothing...” I started, but then I found myself unable to continue. Nothing *had* happened in a crossing-the-line sense, but she *had* felt up my stomach. “Nothing happened,” I finally said nonetheless.

“Your face says otherwise.”

“No, no, no. You just touched my stomach a little bit. It’s basically like nothing happened.”

“Excuse me?! I don’t remember that at all! Remember... Remember, Nanami,” she muttered. Nanami-san then returned to holding her head and groaning, though this time she didn’t seem to mind when the blanket slipped off of her, as she was too desperate to remember what had happened.

I stood up and reached my hand out to her, looking at her out of the corner of my eye. “Shall we go then, Nanami-san?”

“I suppose so,” she said. She looked at my hand and, as if giving up, looked away and hung her head. When she looked back up, she finally took my hand and slowly stood up. “Ugh, I’m more sleepy than usual.”

Then, with uncertain steps, Nanami-san started walking. I’d thought she’d let go of my hand once she was on her feet, but she kept a firm grip on it. She didn’t seem like she was about to let go any time soon.

I guess this works. Her steps are a bit unsteady, so I should probably walk with her in case she gets hurt.

“Can you walk, Nanami-san? Are you okay?”

“I feel kinda dizzy. Is this a hangover? I know you’re not supposed to drink until you’re twenty, but I don’t think I wanna drink even after that if it’s gonna be like this.”

Nanami-san leaned on me slightly. I walked slowly, trying to make sure she wouldn’t fall. Her body was warm because she’d just gotten out of bed, and I felt my cheeks growing hot.

So this is how she gets after eating whiskey bonbons, huh? Do people usually get this sick? I’d never had alcohol before either, so I couldn’t say for sure, but if that were the case, I didn’t want to drink alcohol either.

“Hey, Yoshin, can you give me a piggyback ride?”

“Nope. We’re about to go down the stairs. Here, I’ll hold you up while you try to walk.”

“Dang it.”

Stairs were dangerous enough, but carrying her on my back while she was wearing such a skimpy outfit was dangerous in a different way. Had Nanami-san realized that? No, she probably hadn't. She didn't seem to be thinking clearly yet.

Eventually, we reached the living room. Saya-chan, Nanami-san's little sister, and Genichiro-san, her father, were cooking together in the kitchen. Her two friends, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san, were helping out.

“Morning!” Nanami-san called.

“Good morning, Nanami,” Genichiro-san replied. “Did you sleep well— Nanami?!”

Nanami-san's dad was so surprised, he failed to finish his greeting. Next to him, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san exchanged guilty looks. Saya-chan, on the other hand, seemed vaguely amused.

“Oh, hi, dad,” Nanami-san said. “Did you get home late last night? You know you shouldn't be drinking too much.”

“Uh, no, I didn't drink that much. Hold on! That's not what I'm trying to say.” Genichiro-san extended a quivering finger toward Nanami-san's outfit. He apparently hadn't noticed she was holding my hand. He then turned slowly and shifted his gaze to me.

I looked back at him, straight in the eyes. They were gleaming slightly, as if he were trying to ask me something.

“Yoshin-kun,” he said, “don't tell me the reason you slept on the sofa last night was because...”

“It's as you suspect,” I replied, nodding slightly.

Genichiro-san lowered his shoulders and approached me. Gripping my own shoulders firmly, he looked me in the eyes and said with much sincerity, “I'm sorry about my daughter. I'm amazed you were able to hold yourself back. That's pretty impressive.”

The apology was a bit much. After all, it wasn't that big of a deal. Still, it was true that I'd held myself back, so him praising me for it tickled me. I couldn't help feeling a little happy about it.

Hey, wait a minute. I was able to hold myself back? *I* was?

As I tilted my head, Genichiro-san leaned closer to whisper to me. “In the good old days, I wasn't able to hold back.”

For a brief moment, I pictured the smile of a certain woman. Genichiro-san hadn't mentioned anyone in particular, but there was only one person I could think of: Nanami-san's mother.

Genichiro-san and I nodded at each other and shook hands. Nanami-san frowned as she watched, no doubt wondering what we were doing. *This isn't anything you need to know about, Nanami-san. It's probably something only guys can understand.*

“Morning, Nanami. Morning, Yoshin,” said Otofuke-san, who'd

finally plucked up the courage to chime in.

“Good morning, guys! Did you two *enjoy* yourselves last night?” Kamoenai-san added suggestively.

Kamoenai-san, why would you ask something like that? Both of you know nothing happened!

“Morning, Otofuke-san, Kamoenai-san,” I responded.

“Good morning, you two,” Nanami-san said. “Did you both help with the cooking? I’m totally sorry I didn’t get up. I can help out now, though!” However, as she let go of my hand and tried to step into the kitchen, her two friends raised their hands to stop her. Thrown off by their gesture, Nanami-san wobbled and fell back against me.

“It’s fine, you know? Today we’ll cook to thank you for letting us stay last night and to apologize for various other random things.”

“Yup! Just sit back and relax. It’s nice to take a break once in a while.”

I see. In that case, I should probably help out too—or so I thought as I took a step toward the kitchen. It was then that Nanami-san whispered something. Although her voice was soft, she spoke clearly enough for me to hear.

“But I wanna make Yoshin’s bento.”

With that, everyone froze in place.

As she spoke, Nanami-san had seemed blissfully unaware of what she was doing, but she suddenly came to her senses and covered her mouth with both hands. As for me, I was frozen in my awkward one-step-forward pose. I felt my face grow hotter.

As if to match the speed at which my cheeks blushed, everyone else’s face broke into a grin. They all seemed pretty amused and ready to tease us without mercy.

“I see. So you want to make Misumai’s bento yourself, huh?” Otofuke-san asked.

“Wow, I wish I’d gotten that on camera,” Kamoenai-san added. “Then I could show it to Tomoko-san when she gets up.”

Saya-chan looked just as ready to tear us to pieces. “You have the hots for him this early in the morning? I envy you, onee-chan.”

“You’ve grown so much, Nanami,” Genichiro-san chipped in.

Overwhelmed by their reactions, Nanami-san and I turned even redder and remained silent. I was sweating so hard that my back felt damp. The sweating was clearly from all the pressure, but I was soon going to find myself sweating even more.

“Then leave breakfast and most of lunch to us. We’ll leave Misumai’s bento to you,” Otofuke-san said.

“We’ll just do the prep work,” Kamoenai-san said. “Oh, why don’t you chat with Misumai about this instead?” She took her phone out of her pocket to show us a certain image—an image I had intimate

knowledge of. It was the photo from yesterday, of me kissing Nanami-san on the forehead.

I felt Nanami-san gasp beside me. Genichiro-san wasn't looking at the phone, so he seemed puzzled by her reaction. I, on the other hand, was sweating more than ever—not just my back, but my face as well.

“Hey, Yoshin, can I ask what's going on here?” Nanami-san asked. She had a very sweet smile on her face and spoke in a very sweet voice. Sure, her expression was soothing, but I still couldn't stop sweating. All I could do was respond immediately in the affirmative.

Nanami-san took my hand, and the two of us moved slowly to the living room. I hadn't been expecting the thing I'd meant to tell her—but I hadn't told her, I admit—to come back to bite me now, but it was no use crying over spilled milk, as they say.

As I frantically tried to come up with an excuse, Nanami-san stopped out of everyone else's earshot and whispered for only me to hear, “Don't get me wrong. I'm not mad or anything. I just want to know why you did that.” Bringing her index finger to her lips, Nanami-san blushed slightly and smiled at me lightheartedly. She was looking forward to my explanation, or that's how it seemed to me.

Although I was relieved to hear that, I was nonetheless confronted with the reality that I had to explain why I'd kissed her. That called up another deluge of sweat.

Wouldn't it be better just to have her be straight-up angry with me? I thought, as I continued to search frantically for a way to explain myself.

Chapter 1: Through the Grapevine

I was getting ready for school, so the routine was familiar—eating breakfast, changing into my uniform, et cetera—but to do so in a place other than my own home felt really weird. I was dressed in the same uniform, ready to leave from somewhere else. I guess I was the only one feeling that way, though. At least for Nanami-san, it must have been business as usual.

“I’m off,” I called to a different set of people as I stepped out the door.

“Okay, have a great day, you two. Stay safe.” Tomoko-san, who was wearing cute purple pajamas, rubbed her eyes as she saw us off.

“Bye, mom,” Nanami-san said before lowering her voice. “Wow, it’s super rare to see my mom up this early.”

Scratch what I’d said before—apparently, this morning wasn’t exactly normal for Nanami-san either. I’d heard that Tomoko-san wasn’t a morning person, but I hadn’t realized just how true that was.

“Don’t overwork yourself, Tomoko-san. We’re off,” Otofuke-san said.

“Yup, it’d be no good if you ended up sleep-deprived and couldn’t do anything. See you later!” said Kamoenai-san.

They both waved to Tomoko-san as they left the house. Even while looking sleepy, Tomoko-san waved back. But boy, I never could have dreamed that all four of us would be heading to school together.

“This is so nice,” Nanami-san whispered as she walked next to me. “I wanna do this every week.”

Although that seemed difficult to achieve, I, too, found the whole situation kind of refreshing. How long had it been since I’d last hung out in a big group like this? Maybe a group of four wasn’t that big to most people, but to me it felt huge.

During my middle school graduation trip, the group might have been larger, but I’d always hung out by myself. Even back in our room, I’d always fallen asleep before everyone else had. As for going places with people I’d consider my friends, the last time might have been in elementary school. At the time, I’d probably been— No, let’s not try to remember, or else I’ll feel all hollow inside. Now was all that mattered.

Speaking of current events, I went ahead and counted Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san as my friends, but I couldn’t help but wonder if it

was okay for me to say that my girlfriend's friends were my friends too. I wasn't really sure how things like that worked.

In any case, getting needlessly friendly with girls who weren't my girlfriend was probably bad. It would probably lead to misunderstandings—even if they both had boyfriends themselves. What was important was maintaining an appropriate sense of distance... Yeah, a sense of distance. That was important. If I got that wrong, I could be in for a shock.

Just a few weeks ago, I'd shied away from hanging out with friends and found doing so to be a bother precisely because I didn't know how to maintain a proper sense of distance with people. I had to admit that that came with its own comforts, but I'd somehow changed a lot since then.

"What's up, Yoshin?" Nanami-san asked.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing. It's been a while since I've walked to school in a group like this, so I was just thinking I wasn't really used to it."

"Ah, I see. But it's fun to hang out like this, right? I feel like we're back in elementary school or something."

Nanami-san seemed to have been thinking the same thing I had. The thought warmed my heart a little, and I couldn't help smiling.

Right now, she and I were walking next to each other. The way our hands occasionally touched was both tantalizing and frustrating, but being able to feel her warmth each time was pleasant nonetheless. Normally, we would have held hands, but since her two friends were with us, both Nanami-san and I were holding ourselves back even though they'd obviously seen us hold hands before.

"Hey, you guys don't have to worry about us. Go ahead and hold hands already," Otofuke-san said, noticing our predicament.

"That's right! Come on, hold hands like you always do. There's no need to hold back," Kamoenai-san added.

The two of them were walking a short distance away from Nanami-san and me. To be precise, they were walking behind us as if they were following us. What's more, as if to get a reaction out of us, they were now demanding that we hold hands. They sure seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Nanami-san and I narrowed our eyes and turned around to look at them. Nanami-san even sighed a little. "It's kind of hard to hold hands when you're telling us to," she said.

"What? But you've totally been showing off how you walk into class holding hands with him," Kamoenai-san exclaimed.

"It just feels weird when we're being watched from behind!"

I fully understood how awkward she felt. Feeling like we were being studied was making me feel a little—no, *very*—embarrassed, but for Nanami-san, that didn't seem to be the only reason. She looked

down at my hand and then turned back to the girls.

“Besides, I don’t wanna feel like I’m showing off being able to hold hands on the way to school when you two don’t get to do that with your boyfriends.”

The three of us fell silent for a moment, until finally, Otofuke-san muttered, “Jeez, you’re worrying over nothing.”

“Totally,” Kamoenai-san said. “I mean, I am jealous, but I still want the two of you to get to hold hands.”

Hearing that, Nanami-san seemed unsure of what to do, but she eventually turned a gentle smile toward them. “We’re all together today, so let’s just go as one big group.”

“I mean, it’s fine if that’s what you want. Is Misumai okay with that, though?” Otofuke-san asked.

“Oh, I bet Misumai wants to hold hands with her,” Kamoenai-san added teasingly.

Oh, shoot. Now the ball was in my court. Just how badly did they want us to hold hands? I mean, it wasn’t that I *didn’t* want to hold hands with Nanami-san, but if she didn’t feel inclined to do so, I didn’t want to force her.

“To be honest,” I finally said, “I do want to hold hands with Nanami-san, but I also want to respect her wishes. Besides, we can hold hands anytime.”

I thought it was best to hold hands organically rather than do so because someone told us to. When I expressed that, though, the two friends smiled, looking slightly exasperated.

“Wow, you sure said it how it is, Misumai,” said Otofuke-san.

“Seriously, how can you just say things like that?” added Kamoenai-san.

They seemed impressed for some reason, but I didn’t think I’d said anything that strange. I mean, why would I force Nanami-san to hold hands with me when she wasn’t really up for it? It would only make her uncomfortable.

Meanwhile, Nanami-san was standing next to me, with a shy smile on her face. She was also nodding repeatedly, her smile seeming somewhat satisfied. Seeing her like that made me want to take it all back and grab hold of her hand. Talk about dangerous.

In the end, Nanami-san and I refrained from holding hands as we all walked to school, though the four of us were in this strange formation where Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san flanked us on both sides. For some reason, the two bombarded us with questions along the way. At that point in time, I hadn’t even thought about it—what going to school as the four of us signaled to those around us.

There's no smoke without fire.

It's a saying often used when some kind of rumor arises—a saying that depicts how a rumor only starts because of a root cause, because there's some kind of reason. At least, that's my understanding of it.

But did you know there's also a saying that has the opposite meaning? They say that flowers bloom where there are no roots—that even a baseless story can spread, or something like that. Ultimately, a proverb is only useful once you know the outcome of the situation you want to apply it to. And only once everything is over and done with can you finally decide which saying best applies.

I mention all this now because a rumor had begun circulating around school—a rumor about me. I thought the rumor was the perfect candidate for applying the “flowers bloom” saying because it seemed so baseless to me. But to the people around me, I'd apparently done something to cause the spread of such a rumor. Even though that rumor seemed absurd to the people involved, it was one that seemed well-founded to the people spreading it.

To get to the point, there wasn't actually just one main rumor, but three:

“Yoshin Misumai was dumped by Nanami Barato.”

“Yoshin Misumai made a move on two other girls even though he's dating Nanami Barato.”

“Yoshin Misumai has a harem of three gyaru.”

Ugh, these rumors are giving me a headache.

Incidentally, these were just the three *main* rumors. In addition to these, many more rumors had grown arms and legs, rumors with every kind of variation imaginable that were walking around and spreading. I couldn't even figure out what had happened.

Is it just me, or is the first rumor the only one that seems within the realm of possibility? In fact, it's the exact opposite of the other two!

“How do rumors like that start up in the first place?” you might ask. I'd like to offer an explanation, although it's mixed in with some of my own speculations.

First, the day after our aquarium date, Nanami-san and I had walked into the classroom separately. That really had just been a coincidence—right after we'd arrived at school, I'd gotten a stomachache, so I'd ended up parting ways with Nanami-san and her two friends.

I mean, I wasn't exactly used to the whole sleeping-over thing, so my body was reacting funny, you know? But it's no use making excuses. Regardless, because of that, Nanami-san and her friends had entered the classroom first, followed by me later on. But if that had been the only incident, rumors like these wouldn't have started.

The next factor in all of this was my new haircut.

Let me just start by saying that this wasn't one of those trope-ish turn of events where I became all popular with the girls because I got my locks snipped, making Nanami-san all jealous. Rather, the problem was with me with my new haircut, walking into the classroom by myself with my new haircut. Not only had I not entered the classroom holding hands with Nanami-san, but I had also changed my appearance. I can only assume that those two factors combined had bred unnecessary suspicion in the minds of those around us. In reality, it was probably rarer for us to actually walk into the classroom holding hands than walking in alone or not holding hands. But then, having seen us do it a few times, our classmates had started murmuring among themselves because we hadn't done it just that once.

The third factor that had most likely contributed to my torment was that several students had witnessed the four of us walking to school together—that is, all four of us walking together with me not holding hands with Nanami-san. Witnessing such an unreal scene must have fired up the imaginations of a good number of our peers.

So there you have it: the three “roots” that had most likely led to the three main rumors going around school. Which root had led to which rumor is probably obvious, but who would have thought a haircut would lead people to think I'd gotten dumped? I mean, I'd seen that kind of stuff in manga, but still...

As if that wasn't enough, rumors spread way faster than I'd ever imagined. I mean, most high school students have smartphones nowadays. By late Monday morning, the rumors had already spread all over school. By the time I even heard about them, they had evolved to the point where I'd apparently been dumped because I'd cheated on Nanami-san.

Perhaps it was my fault for not going along with Nanami-san's request of styling my hair. If I'd used wax and taken a little more care with my appearance, maybe none of these rumors would've started.

Actually, no. Maybe styling my hair would've added more fuel to the fire. If I'd done myself up *and* come to school with Nanami-san and the others, it might have made the rumors in the harem vein increase in credibility. All in all, perhaps I'd done the right thing.

The students in our class had seen me and Nanami-san talking about our date, so they didn't seem to believe the rumors. The problem, though, was with the students who *weren't* in our class.

As a side note, back when I hadn't yet heard the rumors, I had only registered that people were giving me weird looks in the hallway. Nanami-san and her friends hadn't heard the rumors until pretty late in the day either. I only found out because a certain someone told me—and that certain someone was Shibetsu-senpai.

Actually, maybe saying he'd told me about them wasn't entirely accurate. During break, Shibetsu-senpai had practically barged into my classroom. The sudden appearance of a senior—not to mention the star of the basketball team—had sent the class into an uproar. Some of the girls had had hearts in their eyes at the sight of him, but he hadn't seemed to care about them one bit.

As soon as senpai saw me, he stormed up to me and exclaimed, "Yoshin-kun! Is it true you cheated on Barato-kun and made her mad and ended up getting dumped?! There's no need to worry, since it must all be a misunderstanding! Come, I'll apologize with you! If you apologize with every bit of sincerity you have, I'm sure Barato-kun will understand it was all just a mistake!"

That was the first time I'd even heard about a rumor going around. With no regard to me or my confusion, Shibetsu-senpai continued talking to me about how I could make up with Nanami-san.

Right. Senpai, Nanami-san is sitting right next to me.

"Wait, I haven't been dumped by Nanami-san. See? She's right here," I said timidly as I gestured toward Nanami-san next to me. Senpai, who was still yelling, seemed not to have noticed Nanami-san at all, because when he finally did see her, he tilted his head quizzically.

"Huh. What's going on then?" he asked.

Right? That's what I wanna know. What's this about me cheating on Nanami-san and making her angry? Apparently, that was what Shibetsu-senpai had heard to make him come rushing right over.

With the still confused senpai standing before her, Nanami-san—as if trying to prove I hadn't been dumped by her—silently hugged my head to her chest.

Wh-What are you doing, Nanami-san?! We're in the classroom! I thought, immediately panicking.



Shibetsu-senpai, on the other hand, seemed to feel the opposite. Seeing the two of us together, he sighed in relief. “What the hell?! What a bullshit rumor!”

With that, he burst into what seemed more like annoyance than anger. I, on the other hand, was more concerned with the contents of the rumor. Nanami-san and I had finally learned of the strange rumors going around, but before I could ask Shibetsu-senpai about the details of the rumor, I heard the sound of a phone camera snapping in a flurry, followed by Otofuke-san’s voice.

“Here you go, Nanami. I got some good ones.”

“Oh, you’re right. Send them to me.”

Before I even knew what was going on, Otofuke-san had taken photos of Nanami-san holding my head to her chest and was now showing them to us. *Wait, what are you doing?* I thought. Nanami-san looked thrilled, so I couldn’t even say anything.

“Do you want these photos too, Yoshin?” Nanami-san asked, showing them to me.

“Uh, I suppose I do,” I said somewhat hesitantly.

With a sly grin on her face, Nanami-san sent me the photos. Seeing them made me ruminate on the softness I’d felt against my head and wonder if it had been the same back at the aquarium.

“So, Shibetsu-senpai, what’s this about a rumor?” I asked once my head was out of the clouds.

“You know, it really doesn’t help if you try to look all serious, when just a moment ago you were getting hugged and grinning like an idiot.”

Huh? Did I really look like that? I couldn’t keep touching my face to check.

With an exasperated look in his eyes, Shibetsu-senpai told us about the rumors that were going around school. Nanami-san and I, and even Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san, finally heard about the details.

“Wow, rumors like that?” I said.

“Hmm, maybe we should’ve held hands this morning,” Nanami-san mumbled.

Otofuke-san was stunned. “Misumai has a harem? And it’s *us*?”

“Aha ha ha! A harem, huh? Hey, Misumai, you wanna make a harem with us?”

No, Kamoenai-san. I do not.

Seeing our respective reactions, Shibetsu-senpai gave a slight nod. “I knew the rumors were unreliable. I’m glad I came to confirm. Hey, how’s about you let me do my part to let everyone know the rumors are bogus? If I text the basketball team’s group chat, I’m sure we can

get things under control.”

“But you came offering to apologize to Nanami-san with me, didn’t you, senpai? Didn’t you half believe the rumor?” I asked.

“What are you talking about? I said that because I was certain you’d never do such a thing.”

It was true that he *had* said it must all be a misunderstanding. For better or worse, he really was a straight shooter who said what he meant and meant what he said. Now he was laughing merrily. Nanami-san and I looked at each other and smiled.

“In that case,” I said to senpai, “I’d really appreciate it.”

“Of course. Leave it to me. But what utter crap! Who in their right mind would spread trash like this?! I’ll sentence the culprits to a full regimen of the basketball team’s training from hell! Now then, Yoshin-kun, best wishes to you and Barato-kun!”

And just like that, Shibetsu-senpai left—fuming, but with a smile on his face.

Shibetsu-senpai really had changed. He seemed to be genuinely rooting for us now, and he was also calling me by my first name. I was pretty sure he’d called me by my last name before then. Those were the supreme skills of the extrovert, I supposed.

“But seriously, I had no idea rumors like that were even going around,” Otofuke-san said.

“Yeah, for real. They didn’t come up in the class group chat. Maybe they didn’t wanna ask,” Kamoenai-san replied.

What, so the two of them didn’t know either?

The class group chat...on a messaging app, I assumed. If no one had mentioned it there, then maybe individuals were getting their information elsewhere. *I’m not gonna dwell on the fact that I didn’t know about that group chat. Yeah, I just won’t even think about it.* Even if I did join it, I probably wouldn’t have anything to contribute. I’d exchanged contact info with Nanami-san, so that was more than enough.

Regardless, we’d managed to clear up the misunderstanding with Shibetsu-senpai. Now we just had to wait patiently until the rumors died down. They do say a wonder lasts but nine days, though having to put up with all the nonsense chatter for much more than a week did sound like a bother.

In any case, everyone’ll get bored soon, I thought.

It wasn’t until lunch break that the real turmoil began.



While Nanami-san and I were sitting on the school rooftop, eating lunch together as usual, loads of people—who’d likely heard the rumors by now—came to pay us a visit. And I mean loads and *loads* of people.

The first to show up were Nanami-san's girlfriends.

Unlike me, Nanami-san had tons of friends. Containing everything from gyaru-type girls to studious girls, quiet, timid-looking girls to hardcore martial artists, the gathering sure was diverse. And the reason all of them had gathered at once was that they all intended to console Nanami-san.

As I said earlier, the rumors were evolving at an alarming rate. Nanami-san's friends, angered by the various versions they'd heard, had gathered together without anyone explicitly saying that they should. Rumors were a horrifying thing.

At first, they'd all seemed angry, so much so that both Nanami-san and I had felt more than slightly intimidated. All the girls surrounding us thought that Nanami-san, whether she'd dumped or been dumped by her first boyfriend—me—must have been heartbroken. Some worried that she might feel uncomfortable around guys because of it; others were intent on beating me to a pulp if the cheating allegations were proven true. Whatever their thoughts, they had all come to comfort their friend, who they believed must be heartbroken.

Despite it all, I was really happy to see just how much everyone liked Nanami-san. I was also a little bit scared of the way the martial artists were so ready to kick my ass. At least they'd come to confirm the situation with Nanami-san first, rather than beating me to a pulp before hearing the whole story. In the end, I'd make it out alive.

The next to gather were the guys.

They'd all come together with the intention of asking out Nanami-san, who they believed was now single. They'd somehow all come to the joint conclusion that if Nanami-san had been willing to date someone like me, they, too, might have a shot at dating her.

Unlike with the girls, I wasn't at all happy with the fact that Nanami-san was liked by so many guys. After all, they "liked" her in a very different sense. Still, I couldn't help but feel a dark and sinister sense of superiority—I mean, even though all this *was* because of a dare, *I was Nanami-san's boyfriend. No, this is no good. I shouldn't get all full of myself like this.*

I wasn't happy, but I also kind of was. My emotions were all over the place, but at the very least, I knew I shouldn't let it get to my head. That wouldn't lead to anything worthwhile. In fact, I would do better to realize just how many guys were ready to date Nanami-san in my stead. I would have to stay on my toes, prepared to take on any future rival.

For the time being, though, I could say that everyone around us was having their hopes, dreams, and delusions shattered before their very eyes. I mean, I couldn't help it if they—both guys and girls—had decided to show up just as Nanami-san was about to feed me lunch

with her own chopsticks. Who's to say if their timing was good or bad?

Once they'd gathered, everyone saw me and Nanami-san eating lunch together and heaved a deep sigh—the girls from relief, the guys from disappointment. The implication of their sighs differed, but they managed a beautiful harmony nonetheless.

“Jeez, aren't you guys worrying a bit too much? I'm grateful you all came to find me, but Yoshin and I are totally in love with each other. Look—we even took this picture!”

Nanami-san smiled brightly as she showed her phone to the group shooting us exasperated looks. I had thought she was going to show them the photo Otofuke-san had taken in the classroom, but the group lost their minds when they saw the photo before them. Like a ripple effect, a bewildered panic spread as more people caught sight of it.

Huh? They're acting strange, right?

Everyone was looking back and forth between me and Nanami-san. Some of the girls were even blushing. What was going on? Sure, being hugged like that *was* kind of embarrassing, but hugs weren't the kind of thing that should provoke so much blushing.

As I continued to wonder, I looked down at Nanami-san's phone and saw the photo being displayed. It was one of me, Nanami-san, and Yuki-chan. It was *that* photo—the one that made us look like a family of three.

“Nanami-san! Isn't that the wrong one?!” I exclaimed.

“Huh? Oh! Whoops, it's actually this one! *This* is the one I meant to show!” she cried.

Nanami-san hurriedly switched to a different photo, but it was too late. All the girls in front of us were looking at us with eyes filled with curiosity, ready to bombard Nanami-san with questions. The boys, on the other hand, looked as if they'd lost all hope. Some of them even fell to their knees or put their hands on my shoulder and said, “I wish you two all the happiness,” before leaving.

With that, even as they continued looking at us, everyone eventually left of their own accord, with no further commotion or fuss. Although there had been quite an uproar, Nanami-san and I were able to finish eating our lunch in peace. That said, I still didn't feel like all our problems were solved.

“Hey, Nanami-san, you don't think a new rumor's gonna go around now, do you?”

“Hmm... I'm not sure. But, well, if it's that kind of rumor, I don't really mind.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, it'll be fine. I'm sure everyone'll laugh off all the weird rumors.”

Despite my worries, Nanami-san didn't seem terribly concerned. *There's no way we shouldn't mind about this*, I thought. *Maybe it isn't so bad for me, but her reputation could be called into question.* But even as I thought that, Nanami-san kept fiddling on her phone, not at all bothered about what had transpired.

"I mean, based on common sense, you and I couldn't possibly have had a kid together. But, if a rumor like that did start, maybe we could just ask Yuki-chan's mom to explain for us."

Nanami-san was spot on about the thought going through my head. Even though I didn't articulate it, what she'd said was probably right.

"You exchanged contact info with her?" I asked.

"Yeah, I figured, why not? I mean, Yuki-chan was the cutest!"

Just as you'd expect from Nanami-san, her communication skills were off the charts. There was no way I could have pulled off something like that.

In the end, her showing people that photo of us and Yuki-chan turned out to be a good thing. When several rumors make their way around, the one with the most impact spreads the fastest. In this case, the fact that the rumors from that morning had been proven wrong by lunch break probably added to that speed. By the time school got out, the rumors had changed once again, having been updated to the following: "Yoshin Misumai and Nanami Barato hang out with a small child on the weekends as if they were family," and "Those two are basically married."

Shibetsu-senpai had probably also done his part. Maybe, as Nanami-san had said, the girls who'd gathered at lunch had also helped to dispel the baseless rumors.

Perhaps this was what they called turning curses into blessings. No, wait—was this a blessing? Well, at least we'd managed to stop any weird rumors in their tracks. Now we could just sit back and relax.

At least, that's what we thought, as we let ourselves relax a bit too much.



It was now after school. Nanami-san was standing before me like a prisoner of war, unable to escape the guards surrounding her. The guards were the girls who'd gathered around us at lunch, as well as Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san.

"All righty then, Mr. Boyfriend. We're gonna borrow Nanami for a bit."

"I'm sorry, Yoshin... I'll be sure to message you constantly. Let's meet up later so we can go shopping together, okay?"

"No problem. Have fun."

To explain what was going on: Apparently, the girls wanted to hear how things were progressing between me and Nanami-san, so they had organized a girls-only meeting. It seemed our progress had been somewhat shrouded in mystery so far, so everyone was itching to hear more.

However, while the girls had been working up the courage to ask, the perfect occasion for them to do so had arisen: the spread of all the rumors, as well as them seeing that photo. Although the photo had overwritten said rumors, it had made the girls' curiosity explode.

On any other day, Nanami-san would probably have refused to go along with a meeting like that, but since both she and I were grateful for the girls' help in dispelling the rumors, she had reluctantly given in. Nanami-san had her own socializing to do, and since Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were there, she would be in safe hands.

After seeing the girls off, I set off on my own mission. My destination was the usual shopping mall. Since I'd only been going there with Nanami-san lately, it had been a long time since I'd last visited there alone. Actually, had it only been two weeks? Wow, I was losing track of time.

But being by myself right now was actually a good thing. I wasn't going to do anything strange, but ever since our date the other day, I'd been toying around with an idea.

During our aquarium date, I'd realized how nice it felt to receive something handmade. The happiness of being able to eat Nanami-san's homemade bento even on a weekend had been incomparable. That was why I wanted to make her something.

This was just my opinion, but just because a gift was handmade, that didn't mean it was only the thought that counted. The gift itself was important too. Food was probably a good idea, since it seemed casual and didn't feel bogged down with meaning.

So, for a while, I'd considered giving her a food item that I'd prepared myself, but given that I was still learning how to cook, I had ultimately decided I didn't feel comfortable cooking something for her yet. She would probably be happy regardless of what I made her, but if possible, I wanted to make her something that she could keep.

That was what was on my mind while I was chatting with Baron-san and the others, which in turn reminded me of what Baron-san had said to me a while ago.

Baron: *If you want to give her a gift, you'd better wait 'til your one-month anniversary or something.*

That's right—our one-month anniversary. And it was only two weeks away. To both me and her, that day was significant because

that was the time limit for Nanami-san's dare.

I didn't know what she would decide to do on that day. Maybe she would break up with me right then and there. Or maybe she wouldn't do anything. Or maybe she would try to celebrate the occasion in a big way.

I still didn't know for sure how she really felt; I could only imagine. That was why, after I'd finished up in the group chat, I decided one thing: on our one-month anniversary, I would confess to her for real.

The decision was tied to the dream I'd had while we were on our aquarium date. In the dream, I'd told Nanami-san with all my sincerity that I liked her, and I wanted to do that in real life as well. I also wanted to use that occasion to give her a handmade gift—to accompany my heartfelt confession to her and to commemorate our one month together.

"I wonder if that'll feel like a bit much," I muttered, doubting myself as usual. This was where my scarce—or rather, total lack of—experience with women got in my way. I didn't know what actions were considered appropriate, so I was practically fumbling my way through the dark, lost and confused. It was very like me to be unsure of myself even after I'd made my decision. Regardless, I wanted to do everything I could so that I'd have no regrets.

I felt I would be more comfortable giving Nanami-san something handmade rather than something expensive, plus I was hoping she would be much happier with something I'd made myself. That was why I was considering making her a necklace out of resin.

At first, I'd considered making her a ring, but not only did rings look difficult to make, they also seemed to have way too much emotional weight attached to them. That made a handmade ring a no-go. I was, however, able to find numerous videos online with instructions on how to make a necklace, and the materials were fairly inexpensive. As a gift, a necklace seemed far less loaded with meaning than a ring did.

That was why I was taking advantage of my time alone, to come to the mall and gather the materials. However...

"Isn't this cute, Nanami-san?" I called when I wasn't thinking. *Damn it—I'm here alone! Now I've made myself look like a weirdo. That was a perfect ten for creepiness.*

From that point on, I did my best not to say anything out loud, but no matter what I saw or touched, my thoughts trailed back to Nanami-san. *Is this because I'm thinking of a gift for her?*

After that, I managed to buy the materials that spoke to me, making sure to get some extra, just in case. I walked around the mall while Nanami-san texted me from time to time, but...I don't know, I

just couldn't seem to calm down. Something didn't feel right.

"I feel lonely," I said out loud. It was my own muttering that made me realize my predicament. *Oh, I get it. I'm lonely.* I was lonely because Nanami-san wasn't with me.

I mean, the whole time from Saturday until that morning, I'd been together with Nanami-san. With her suddenly gone, of course I'd feel a sense of loss. The feeling was unfamiliar, so it had taken me a while to realize what it was. Given just how much I'd changed, I was in no position to say anything about Shibetsu-senpai.

Was this a good change, though?

With my purchases stashed away in my bag, I sat down on a mall bench and looked up at the ceiling. Nanami-san had messaged me, saying she'd finished her meeting with the girls and that she was heading over to meet me.

Seeing that message, I muttered to myself again, this time consciously. "Nanami-san... I can't wait to see her."

In response came the voice I'd been waiting to hear—the voice I hadn't been expecting to hear yet at all.

"Me too! I couldn't wait to see you, so I rushed over."

When I looked in surprise toward the direction of the voice, I saw Nanami-san standing there together with Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san.



“How long have you been there?” I asked, hesitating a bit.

“Long enough to hear the part when you said you felt lonely,” Nanami-san replied. “Jeez, Yoshin, I didn’t know you wanted to see me that much! You’re such a baby. Come here; let me spoil you.”

Nanami-san sat down next to me very intentionally and spread her arms wide, inviting me for a hug. She would probably have panicked and turned beet red if I’d actually hugged her right there and then, but she was most likely doing it because she knew I wouldn’t be able to accept in a place like this.

But support came from an unexpected source.

“Yeah, all of a sudden, in the middle of our meeting, she started saying how much she wanted to see you. That kinda forced us to call it a day, and we headed over here,” Otofuke-san said.

“I mean, everyone already heard what they wanted to hear, so they probably got their money’s worth of gossip, right? After a while, it just became Nanami’s little ooey-goey solo show. It was totally sweet to watch,” Kamoenai-san added.

“Jeez, you two didn’t need to tell him that!” Nanami-san exclaimed, protesting with her fists. I was afraid to ask what she’d said to all the girls present, so I decided to keep my mouth shut.

“Thanks for making sure she got here safe, girls,” I said.

“No need,” Otofuke-san replied. “All right, you two, the third and fourth wheels are leaving. Enjoy your shopping honeymoon.”

“Bye-bye, guys,” Kamoenai-san added. “See you tomorrow!”

“We’re not newlyweds! We’re just picking up groceries for dinner like normal!” Nanami-san yelled.

“Aha ha, see you both tomorrow,” I said as Nanami-san and I waved her friends goodbye.

Left to ourselves, Nanami-san and I soon fell silent. I offered her my hand, feeling happy to see her blushing face again. Nanami-san took it in silence, and we headed off toward the grocery store, holding hands like always.

Yeah, having her next to me just feels right somehow, I thought as we began chatting away about what to make for dinner. Feeling the warmth of her hand in mine, I told myself once more that, for our anniversary, I would tell Nanami-san how I felt—no matter how things turned out.



On our one-month anniversary, I’m gonna tell her how I feel.

I knew I’d decided that, and I was making preparations for it, but as an entirely separate issue, I was faced with a much more pressing dilemma.

“Oh, wow. This is bad,” I muttered, slumping over my desk as I looked over my results from last week’s math test.

Thirty-six. My score was a dismal thirty-six out of a hundred.

This was bad. It was just barely above thirty, the failing grade. I was glad I hadn’t failed, but this was by far the worst grade I’d ever received. Before now, I’d always gotten scores somewhere in the fifties and sixties, so to have my score fall so much hurt pretty bad.

“How did you do on the test, Yoshin?” Nanami-san asked, approaching my seat. Seeing me, though, she paused. “Wow, you seem really bummed. Was it that bad?”

I handed her my test paper without saying anything. Sensing something was definitely up, she looked silently at the paper for a moment and then said, “Wow.” She must have said it without meaning to, because a moment later, she brought her hand to her mouth.

I’d never heard Nanami-san sound so put off by something. I’d gotten to experience yet another first with her, but this one certainly didn’t make me feel happy.

There were so many different meanings packed into that single word. Her voice had the kind of ring to it that might have opened up a door to a whole new fetish for me, if only she’d accompanied it with a look of scorn. Fortunately, she had a tense smile on her face instead.

“W-Well, this test was kind of hard, you know? I’m impressed you didn’t fail,” she said. She tried to console me by stroking my hair, but she remained unable to stop smiling. I obviously wasn’t quite convinced, already knowing that Nanami-san had scored higher than I had.

Actually, maybe I should start by addressing the fact that she was stroking my hair while we were both in the classroom. Was it just me, or were the people around us giving us strange warm looks?

“What did you get, Nanami-san?” I asked.

“Uh, this,” she said, showing me her test paper.

Eighty-seven! She’d gotten eighty-seven. Her score was more than double my own, despite her saying the test had been kind of hard. I couldn’t help but wonder what her scores were usually like. I’d heard that her grades were good, but I hadn’t been aware they were *this* good.

“That’s amazing, Nanami-san. I couldn’t really study and stuff for this one, but I’ll have to work harder next time.”

“Was it my fault?” she asked.

“No, no, that’s not it at all. It was just my lack of effort,” I said to reassure her, even as I let out a large yawn.

Although it was true that I’d been spending a lot of time with Nanami-san, if I’d actually tried, I would have been able to make time

for studying after I'd gotten home. Instead, I'd spent that time working out, playing games, and reporting back to Baron-san and the others. I'd simply been slacking off.

But this was bad. To have my grades drop so much now might get Nanami-san in trouble. I had to do something to make sure I set time aside for studying, but how was I supposed to do that while also preparing my gift for her? If push came to shove, I might need to suck it up and stay up a few nights.

"Are you thinking about staying up at night to make time for studying?" Nanami-san asked, glaring at me and making me jump. With her eyes still narrowed, she brought her face extremely close to mine until our noses were almost touching. From there, she continued glaring at me as if to make a point. I couldn't bring myself to look her in the eyes, so I just ended up looking everywhere but at her face. This wasn't because she'd seen right through me; she was just so close, I didn't know what else to do.

Confirming her suspicions based on my reaction, she sighed without moving away. I felt her breath on my face, which made my heart skip a beat. I knew she wasn't doing it intentionally, but that small act was nonetheless bad for my heart.

"You're so easy to read, Yoshin. You know you shouldn't stay up all night and overwork yourself."

"Yeah, but I'm still young. It'll be fine even if I cut back on my sleep a bit."

"I'm worried about you, so no. Jeez." Nanami-san stepped away from me and put her hand on her forehead, exasperated.

Hmm, I really shouldn't worry her, so maybe staying up all night is a no-go. If that's the case, I guess I'll have to cut back on the time I spend playing my game. Given that a student's job is to study, I guess that's to be expected. I'll just have to explain things to Baron-san and the others.

As I sat there considering my options, I noticed Nanami-san looking something up on her phone. Then, after nodding once, she brought her face close to mine again. "Hey, Yoshin, do you wanna study with me from now on? We've been talking in my room until now, but I could use that time to tutor you."

Nanami-san's proposal seemed almost too good to be true. Come to think of it, all those times I'd been there, I'd been taking time away from Nanami-san's studying, hadn't I? And yet she'd managed to keep up her grades. Nanami-san really was impressive.

"Well, that's great by me, but is that okay with you, Nanami-san?"

"Of course that's fine by me. They call it a 'study date,' apparently. If we think of it as going on a date every day after school, doesn't it seem kinda nice?"

A study date... Doesn't that sound kind of contradictory? Can studying

and going on a date really balance each other out? That seems kinda difficult to do. I was impressed by the creativity of those who were able to turn anything into a date. I wouldn't have been able to come up with that no matter how hard I'd tried.

"Wait, if that's the case, does that mean all our chats in your room count as dates too?" I asked.

It was just an offhand comment, but it seemed I was right on the money. Nanami-san turned bright red and started slapping me on the back. Yeah, I guess saying it out loud *was* a little embarrassing.

By this point, we'd gotten used to all the stares that seemed to say, "There they go again." I felt like everyone around us had become a little bit kinder toward us since the incident with the rumors—though I wasn't sure if that was actually the case or if I was just imagining it.

"Then we'll start today," Nanami-san said as she fiddled with her phone.

Deciding that together was about the only thing that happened at school that day. All the rumors from the day before had died down somewhat. Of course, minor ones were still going around on some parts of campus, but no one came to confront us anymore.

The school day eventually ended, and we proceeded with our usual routine—shopping for groceries, making dinner, and having our meal together. Once we were all done, we moved to Nanami-san's room.

Just as I was thinking that we would start studying, Nanami-san said, "Give me a few minutes, okay?" and walked out. I was left all alone in her room. We'd brought all our books and study materials. What else did she need to prepare?

After I waited for quite some time, Genichiro-san came into the room first. *Is Genichiro-san going to study with us too?* I wondered. *Probably not.* He had brought with him a small, round table that he placed in the center of Nanami-san's room. Then he turned to me and said, "Good luck, Yoshin-kun," before leaving the room.

Oh, I see. He brought a table for us to study at. How kind of him.

Right after Genichiro-san left, Nanami-san reentered the room, but when I saw her, I was left speechless.

"Shall we get started then? Please take out your test from today, Yoshin-kun," she said.

Just like how she'd gone all out with her cooking lesson, she was going full-on teacher mode for our math class. Absolutely nothing she'd said had entered my brain. I found that, because of the shock, I was unable to properly process any incoming information.

Nanami-san was wearing a white button-down shirt and a blue necktie, along with a tight black skirt. A pair of silver glasses that I'd never seen before framed her eyes, and her hair was up in a side

ponytail.

Huh? Why are you cosplaying all of a sudden? This is cosplay, right?

“Um, Nanami-san, why are you dressed like that?” I asked.

“Like this? When I told my mom I was going to tutor you, she let me borrow them. What do you think? I could pass for a teacher, right? Do I look cute?”

“Y-Yeah, you look cute.”

I mean, she did look cute, but I felt like the outfit was a bit too...stimulating. I'd never in my life seen such a tight skirt, and my heart was pounding from just how mature she looked.

Nanami-san, however, sat down across from me and started staring seriously at my test paper. Seeing her seriousness, I felt ashamed for having such impure thoughts. At this moment, we weren't boyfriend and girlfriend; we were student and teacher. That was how seriously I had to take this situation.

“Seeing your answers, I feel like you're making a lot of careless errors. And I think you're also using the wrong formulas. You're making the same mistakes a lot. Are you the type to just memorize the problems and answers from the textbook?”

“Uh, yeah. I often end up not knowing which formula I'm supposed to use or when to use it, so I just try to memorize everything and then figure out which one I'm supposed to put in.”

“I see. In math, I think it's more important to understand the material than to memorize it. If you're going to memorize things, it's better to memorize patterns. Even if you memorize pairs of problems and answers, you're not really gonna be able to apply them. That's not too different from subjects in the humanities.”

From there, she went through my test and gave me advice about the problems I'd gotten wrong. Even when she pointed things out to me, rather than telling me the answer, she explained to me *why* I'd gotten something wrong or which formula I should be using instead. She accompanied every point with a thorough explanation.

Even for parts that I didn't understand, she was very patient and went through the material thoroughly. She wasn't strict at all; in fact, her tone was very gentle. Once she explained things to me, I often felt embarrassed about the mistakes I'd made, but I also realized how considerate her method of teaching was.

I feel kind of bad toward my teacher for saying this, but I felt I understood things a hundred times better after Nanami-san had explained them to me. It's not that my teacher was bad; it had more to do with my attitude.

Because Nanami-san and I were sitting across from each other, she had to stretch her body forward in order for her to show me things. At first I'd been listening intently, but at some point, I realized

something.

The shirt and skirt that she was wearing—they belonged to Tomoko-san, but they didn't really seem to fit her. That is, every time she leaned forward, there was a little gap between her shirt and her body. She was probably wearing the tie in order to hide it, but throughout our session, the tie had loosened slightly.

I quickly turned my gaze away in order not to look, but I couldn't really help catching a glimpse of something orange and somewhat gaudy in the corner of my eye.

"What's wrong, Yoshin?" Nanami-san asked.

"Nanami-san, do you mind covering up your chest area a bit? I can see."

Panicked, Nanami-san brought her hands to her chest and leaned back in her seat. She then looked at me, glaring a little, and muttered, "Did you see?"

"Just a bit. But I didn't see anything terribly clearly."

"Orange..."

With that single word, my whole body shuddered. It seemed Nanami-san was quaking too, perhaps from embarrassment. I was about to get down on my knees to apologize, but Nanami-san stood up instead.

"Well, I guess if it's you, then I don't mind. But can you wait just a little bit? I'm gonna go change."

With that, she left the room once again. Was it good that I'd told her? Or should I have kept it to myself? No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't seem to come up with the right answer. Regardless, I knew that I was one lucky guy, even if continuing to ogle felt wrong. That last part was why I'd ended up telling her.

After a while, Nanami-san returned, having changed into gray loungewear. "We can concentrate now, huh?" she said.

I nodded. "Honestly, just you being my teacher makes me nervous. That loungewear is really cute, though."

"Thanks... But come on, let's focus on studying now, okay?"

Blushing slightly, Nanami-san looked down at my math test again and resumed our lesson. Now that she'd talked me through it all, I felt like I had a much better grasp on the material covered. Unlike our usual chats, this tutoring session required a lot of physical and mental energy, but it, too, filled me with a comfortable sense of fatigue.

Once we'd finished studying, Nanami-san's mother brought us cups of hot tea and small chocolate snacks. Nanami-san seemed to have asked her beforehand.

I had a sip of the tea and ate my chocolate in one piece. I felt the warmth of the tea and the sweetness of the chocolate melting in my mouth travel together throughout my tired body.

“I’ll tutor you like this every day from now on. It’ll be a good review for me, and your grades will go up too, right?”

“I feel bad, but I’ll definitely take you up on it. You’re planning on going to college, right? Is there something you want to be in the future?”

Nanami-san placed her cup of tea down and smiled at me gently. “I actually wanna be a teacher when I grow up.”

“A teacher? Is that why you’re so good at explaining things?”

“Well, I admit I’m not entirely set on it.”

“I’m sure you’d make a great teacher.”

With that, I pictured Nanami-san as a teacher, but in that same moment, a foreboding thought crossed my mind. If she were to become a middle school or high school teacher, she would definitely be popular. There would most definitely be male students who would have a crush on her, and they might even decide to hit on her. Or worse, her coworkers might even fall for her. That would be more likely than students trying to ask her out. I really wanted to support her in her dreams, but at the same time, I felt very worried.

“Yoshin, why are you looking at me like that? Are you worrying about when I become a teacher?”

“Well, I’m not worrying, exactly, but you’d probably be really popular if you became a teacher, right?”

I knew I was being a worrywart, so I decided not to say anything more. There was no reason to feel anxious about the future, but my imagination was making me nervous.

Nanami-san smiled happily at my comment. She came closer to me, taking the trouble to crawl under the table rather than go around it. As I wondered why she’d done that, she proceeded to rest her head in my lap.

So this is what she wanted to do, huh? Perhaps she couldn’t be bothered to stand up. Looking up at me out of the corner of her eye—as I sat there both surprised and amused—Nanami-san raised her left hand.

“If you’re so worried, then when I become a teacher, maybe I should just wear a ring here. Then everything will be fine, don’t you think?”

“Wear a ring? Like, to ward off evil and stuff? I dunno if that stuff actually works, even if you wear it on your ring finger... Wait, your ring finger?”

Looking at where she was pointing with her right hand, I finally understood what she was trying to say.

Nanami-san smiled a very satisfied smile. Then, growing embarrassed, she glowed bright red and turned away from me. “I mean, you know, even if it’s not for real, it might still be effective as

long as I'm wearing one. I know it's not for a while, and no one knows what'll happen before then, but I just thought I'd mention it."

Having given an explanation that sounded more like an excuse, Nanami-san fell silent. I didn't know what to say in response, so I, too, didn't say a word. Eventually, as if trying to squeeze out my voice, I opened my mouth and said, "Doesn't a ring feel like it's too loaded for a gift?"

"Not at all. If I'm getting it from you, then anything will make me happy. Oh, but it's not like I'm trying to ask you for one or anything like that! I'm happy as long as you're with me."

Nanami-san's voice grew softer and softer. I was glad she would feel happy if I gave her something like that. If even a ring was okay, then a handmade necklace would be perfectly fine for our anniversary.

"Let's do our best together from here on out," Nanami-san said to me softly.

"Yeah, let's," was all I could say in response.

Silence enveloped us once again as we both looked at each other and smiled. *Yeah, I'll do my best*, I thought. *I'll do my best with Nanami-san, and, of course, with my studies.*

Interlude: The Rumors and My Left Hand

After Yoshin left, I lay on my bed, alone in my room. Earlier, I'd been using Yoshin's lap as my pillow, but now I was using a normal one. I reached my left hand toward the ceiling and looked at my ring finger. There wasn't anything there, but for some reason, I couldn't take my eyes off of it.

While tutoring Yoshin, I'd told him about my hopes for the future. I'd told him without thinking that having a ring there, on my left ring finger, would be nice.

"Jeez, seriously, why did I say something like that? He totally didn't know how to respond."

I must have really shaken him, because he'd asked me whether receiving a ring felt like a bit much. I was interested in jewelry and stuff, but I'd only meant the cheap kind that we could buy with our allowances.

It was way too early in the game to be thinking about putting a ring on this finger. I mean, who knew how feelings would change with time? Not mine; mainly his. But...

"I wonder how much he likes me," I mumbled to myself.

I gently touched the tip of my finger to my forehead. It was the place where he was kissing me goodnight in the photo Ayumi had shown me. When I rubbed it, it tickled. I lifted my fingertip off of my forehead and ran it along my lips.

If he'd kissed me on his own, not by accident, then it was okay for me to think that he liked me, right? I didn't know how boys felt about these things, but when I looked at that photo, my anxiety faded a little. Just a little.

Come to think of it, I still had all sorts of questions about Sunday night. Why had I fallen asleep? Or more to the point, how had I ended up getting drunk? I mean, I knew that it was because I'd eaten too many whiskey bonbons, but...what a total waste!

I couldn't help but wonder whether Yoshin would have done the exact same thing if I'd been awake and sober. Maybe we would have just said our goodnights without a kiss. If so, then even if the kiss had been by chance, maybe I'd made the right move.

"But I'm never gonna eat whiskey bonbons ever again," I said, clenching my fist. In fact, I didn't plan on consuming alcohol at all—

even after I turned twenty.

In any case, even though it was only the second day of the week, I felt like those two days had been pretty eventful. Even though Monday mornings were usually a downer, this past Monday I'd felt happy right from the start. Yoshin had been with me when I woke up; we'd all eaten breakfast together; and then we'd walked to school together as a group. I hadn't felt one hundred percent when I'd first woken up, but when I'd seen his face, any thought about that had been swept out the window.

I'd arrived at school all excited that something good was going to happen, but boy, it was totally the opposite.

I've heard that, at the end of it all, all the ups and downs in life balance themselves out. Maybe this had been a small sample of that. I mean, who could've guessed that rumors like those would go around? There was no way Yoshin would cheat on me, and him having a harem was even less likely. The rumors themselves fizzled out quickly though, thanks to everyone's help. And while another rumor was now going around in their place, that one was less of an issue...I think.

To tell the truth, I'd felt kind of shocked when I'd heard one of the rumors—not the one about the harem or the one about him cheating on me, but the one about me dumping Yoshin—because that rumor might turn out to be true, but the other way around. In a month, I was going to tell him I liked him—for real this time. I was also going to apologize. Who knew how things could turn out as a result of that?

The thought alone frightened me. And, to counter that anxiety, I'd started being way more touchy-feely with Yoshin than usual. I kept hugging him and feeding him his bento and stuff. That was why, when I'd finished talking with the girls and gone to meet him, I'd been so happy to hear him say he'd felt lonely.

When I'd met up with the other girls, they'd asked me all sorts of stuff about how things were progressing between me and Yoshin. Their questions, though, had been so intense that I'd felt overwhelmed. They'd asked me stuff like whether we'd kissed and...h-how far we'd gotten and that sort of thing. Some of the girls with boyfriends had asked stuff so totally outrageous that they'd left me speechless.

At first I'd just been answering their questions, but after a while, I'd ended up as the one doing all the talking. I think the relief I'd felt from knowing the rumors had been taken care of had also had something to do with it. *Now that I think about it, by the time I left, everyone was slumped over their desk. I wonder what happened to them...*

One of the things I'd learned from the incident with the rumors was that people *loved* talking about scandals. If Yoshin and I were to do something strange, word would definitely get around fast.

I'll just keep the fact that Yoshin slept over at my place on Sunday night to myself. If a rumor about that started going around... I shuddered just thinking about it. Who knew what people would say? I couldn't even begin to guess how the story would be twisted.

I had to be careful. Never mind me—I didn't want there to be problems for Yoshin. I needed to refrain from doing anything careless. Oh, but I still wanted to spend time with him. That was why even today, after all the development of all those rumors, we'd been studying together in my room. No, I don't mean that in a weird way, but I guess borrowing those clothes from my mom just to get into the spirit of things might have been a mistake.

He'd probably seen some things because the clothes hadn't fit me properly. Yoshin was such an honest person for actually pointing that out to me. If he'd really wanted to, he could have just kept staring.

I wonder if Yoshin's already home by now, I thought. I should message him again after I take a bath and tell him I'm stoked for us to give it our all tomorrow.

Truth be told, I was surprised that Yoshin wasn't that great at studying. He was such a diligent guy that I'd assumed he was studious. You really can't judge a book by its cover, but that's not something I should be saying myself.

Really, though, his gentlemanly personality saved me in so many ways. What would have happened if *he* had fallen asleep on Sunday and been lying there in front of me, completely vulnerable? Would I have made a move on Yoshin?

No way! I wouldn't! Really, I swear!

Just who was I trying to convince? Regardless, just thinking about it made my cheeks burn. If he were asleep in front of me and we were completely alone, what would I do? Would something like that even happen?

Realizing it was no use thinking about such things, I sat up on my bed. *Yeah, I'll do my best starting tomorrow. I'll do my best with Yoshin—in both my studies and our relationship. Come to think of it, I told Yoshin about my hopes for the future, but I wonder what Yoshin's dreams are. Maybe I'll ask him next time I see him. Maybe, if possible, we could end up going to the same college. Yeah, that would make me really happy.*

Picturing the two of us attending college together, I headed off to the bath, feeling much lighter than usual.

Chapter 2: Our Little Trip and My Lie

With such an intense—well, intense for me—incident having landed on us at the beginning of the week, I was nervous about what the rest of the week had in store, but it seemed there was no need for me to worry. At least in terms of school, time passed peacefully without any problems. I mean, me getting a crappy score on a test wasn't that big of a deal. That was why I was able to spend time with Nanami-san very comfortably, peacefully, and happily.

In the morning, we walked to school together. We ate together at lunch. After school, we went home, had dinner, and studied together. I was pretty much living the good life.

I shouldn't take my situation for granted, though. Even if—or especially if—no problems arose, I should always keep in mind that every day was special.

Nanami-san had asked me if I wanted to study together on the weekend too, but I'd told her I wanted to thank her for tutoring me and asked her out on a date instead. To be honest, asking her out on a date always made me nervous, but I think I managed it somehow.

Nanami-san had happily agreed to the date, but she'd also told me we should study together once we got home. *Am I really making her worry that much in terms of my grades?* I wondered. *I guess so, huh.*

Getting back on track, given that she'd at least agreed to go on a date with me, I'd begun to wonder where to take her on our next date. The zoo, perhaps? Maybe that was too cliché. I had to come up with a plan.

I'd also been keeping up with my daily reports to Baron-san and my in-game teammates. Baron-san had told me I didn't need any more advice, but I still wanted to know what he and others thought. I especially wanted to hear what Peach-san had to say about my anniversary present idea, since she was a girl and all. Moreover...

Canyon: I'm thinking of telling her on our one-month anniversary that I like her.

I made my declaration to Baron-san and the others to prove my unwavering resolve. I felt embarrassed about sharing such a private decision, but he welcomed my sentiments warmly.

Baron: Ah, so that's what you went with.

Canyon: Are you surprised?

Baron: No, not at all. I'm pretty sure things are gonna turn out fine, so I'm not even worried.

Canyon: I'm not so sure. I mean, it's my first time ever telling a girl that I like her.

Yeah, that was the problem. I'd never confessed my feelings to anyone before. I'd never even written a love letter—though, nowadays, I wasn't really sure if anyone had. That was why I was struggling to figure out what to say in order to tell her how I felt.

Baron: Do you need any advice on telling her how you feel?

Baron-san, with his impeccable timing, had read my mind as usual, but as much as I appreciated his offer, I politely declined.

Canyon: Thanks, but I wanna figure out how to say this on my own, no matter how much of a struggle that is.

Baron: Is that so? Gosh, watching a youngster mature is utterly mesmerizing. I'm all choked up, even though it's not even about me. You know, I think you've just earned yourself a certificate as official boyfriend material—not that I'm qualified to issue that certificate.

That sure was an exaggeration, but even then, I felt happy being told I'd matured. It was hard for me to notice whether I was getting better at any of this.

Baron: Oh, just one thing—I'm really just talking to myself here, but if you try to be cool about it or come up with some elaborate way of saying things, there's a chance you'll slip and fall on your face.

Canyon: Baron-san, could it be that you...?

Baron: No comment. I'll just leave that tidbit as a random guy's sad tale of failure.

I didn't press him about whose story that was. Hearing the answer might make me sad too. Whatever the case, I wouldn't let his warning go unheeded. I guess I'd ended up getting advice after all.

Just then, a message then popped up from Peach-san, who seemed

to have been watching our back-and-forth.

Peach: Um, may I add something?

Thinking that she didn't need to be so considerate, I responded that she definitely could. Another message from her appeared immediately.

Peach: I think telling her you like her would be really lovely, but even if you don't tell her, isn't just celebrating your one month together enough?

Canyon: I guess me telling her is like a way of setting things right, so to speak.

Peach: Really? Well, if that's what you've decided, then I think that's the way to go.

Canyon: Thanks, Peach-san. Actually, there's something I want to ask you...

That was when I brought up the gift I was planning to give Nanami-san for our one-month anniversary: the necklace that would accompany my confession. It seemed like a bit much, which was why I wanted to get a girl's opinion.

Baron-san seemed thrilled that I was asking a girl for advice, which seemed like a weird thing to get excited over. Just what had he thought of me until now?

Peach-san must have been thinking hard, because her response came a short while later.

Peach: I do think it's a nice idea. I might feel a bit intimidated if someone gave me something super expensive, but something handmade by my boyfriend would be nice. It's sweet, really. I'd love to receive something like that.

Baron: Yeah, I feel the same way. Something handmade, huh? I haven't given my wife anything like that in a while. Maybe I should follow your example and try it out.

Canyon: That's a relief. I was worried it might seem like a bit much.

Peach: Whether it is or not is probably up to your girlfriend, no? Has she ever said anything about gifting jewelry?

We *had* had that chat about rings the other day. I ended up typing

out that exchange too, though I didn't share the whole story.

Baron: Wait, what?! Tell us more!

Peach: Same! Come to think of it, your update about the after-date sleepover was also missing a few details! Did you two kiss? Spill it!

Shoot, I kicked the hornet's nest!

I'd chatted with Baron-san and the others the night of our date, but I'd purposefully left out a few of the juicier details. I seemed to have ended up stumbling into topics I should have avoided.

For now, I maintained the vagueness of my story by saying that the details would remain as a memory between me and Nanami-san. I was way too embarrassed to share whether we'd actually kissed or how. At least that was my reasoning, but...

Baron: I see, so you did do something memorable.

Peach: High schoolers really are something else...

In the end, my vagueness only made them speculate more. Damn, I know I'd been put on the spot, but that was a careless move on my part.

With that, I somewhat forced our conversation to a close and left the game. The hiccup had made me panic somewhat, but I'd gotten the green light for my gift. It sure was a relief.

In terms of the design, Baron-san had cautioned me that I should come up with something that suited the recipient, rather than make something too masculine. He'd said that while recounting his own tale of failure, since he was going to give his wife a handmade gift for the first time in a long while—but I was pretty sure that tale was also his own way of giving me advice. I really couldn't thank him enough.

Now that I'd gotten advice from everyone and was about to head into the final week of the dare, I really had to pull myself together. *I have to do everything in my power*, I told myself.

I'd never attempted to make a piece of jewelry before, but that in and of itself was fun. When I thought about the possibility of seeing Nanami-san happy, I felt like I could do anything.

After that, the week continued with nothing unexpected happening. The days flew by as normal.

The problem arose once we hit the weekend.

Actually, it wasn't a *problem*, per se, but it *was* unexpected. The incident was brought on by my mother.

“Nanami-san, Yoshin—we’re going to the hot springs.”

The one who’d greeted us when we had entered the Barato house was my mother. As soon as she’d opened her mouth, an incomprehensible phrase had flown out. *No, wait, why are you even here?* I wondered.

Before we could even let anyone know we’d arrived back home, both Nanami-san and I had to blink a few times in confusion. Seeing my mom—her posture straight and her demeanor dignified as usual—we couldn’t quite process the incoming information.

When my mom saw us like that, she brought her hand up to her mouth, making out that she was thinking. “My mistake. I was so caught up in the moment, I forgot to welcome you back home. That was very rude of me. Welcome home, you two.”

“Uh, thanks, mom,” I said.

“It’s good to see you, Shinobu-san,” Nanami-san added.

My mom greeted us in a calm voice, the corners of her mouth raised ever so slightly to form a soft smile. “I hope you both had a nice day at school.”

“Mom, you seem weirdly excited,” I said.

“Huh? This is her excited?” Nanami-san looked back and forth between me and my mom, surprised.

It was true that, for people who didn’t know my mom, she was speaking so softly that no one would ever guess she was excited, but I could tell from her body language that she was worked up over something. This was my mom’s habit whenever she wasn’t her calm, normal self. Now, if she were to start singing some weird, nonsensical song, that would mean that her level of tension had *completely* maxed out.

No, it was no use overthinking my mom’s excitement. Why was she here in the first place? Wasn’t it tomorrow that she was supposed to be back for a break from her business trip?

“Welcome home, you two. Were you surprised?” Tomoko-san asked, poking her head out from behind my mom. She had her hands on my mom’s shoulders and seemed to have been hiding on purpose. Perplexed by her smiling face as always, I had no clue what Nanami-san’s mother was thinking.

“I was surprised. I didn’t know mom was gonna be here,” I said.

Tomoko-san laughed. “It was actually my idea. Looks like we got you.”

“Good work, Tomoko-san.”

The two mothers smiled and high-fived each other as though they’d been friends for years. *When did these two get so close?* I wondered.

“It’s so nice to see you again. I’m sorry I couldn’t say hello last

week.” Nanami-san, who’d looked nervous just a moment ago, jumped and offered mom a bow.

Oh, you don’t have to do that, Nanami-san. My mom is just having her fun.

My mom shifted her gaze from Tomoko-san and looked into Nanami-san’s eyes. “Don’t you worry, Nanami-san. Thank you for always taking care of our son. Tell me, did you enjoy your date last week?”

“Yep! We had so much fun!” Nanami-san replied.

“I’m glad to hear it. Yoshin gets so embarrassed that he won’t share any of the details. Please do tell me more about it later.”

“Gladly!”

Oh, jeez. Give me a break... I mean, come on, what kind of high schooler tells his parents about what happens on his dates? That goes for you too, Nanami-san. Don’t go getting all excited, and please keep stories about our dates to yourself.

I thought for a moment. *Could it be that my mom came back early just to ask about that?* I wondered. *No, wait—what did she say earlier? She said “hot springs,” didn’t she?*

Before I could continue my train of thought, Tomoko-san clapped her hands. “Anyway, come on in, you guys. Let’s sit down and chat. Shinobu-san brought us a little gift, so once you’re both changed, we can all have some tea.”

She was right—it was a little odd continuing this conversation while all of us stood inside the front door.

Nanami-san and I exchanged glances as we were ushered inside. Despite the shock we’d just received, she seemed to be having fun nonetheless. *Please don’t tell me she was looking forward to telling my mom about our date.*

The thought made me a bit nervous, but for now I set it aside. Nanami-san and I each got changed, and then we reconvened in the living room. There was already some tea waiting on the table when we got there.

Once we’d sat down, I sipped some of the hot liquid to calm myself down—which was when my mother dropped a bombshell on me.

“Oh, by the way, Yoshin, did you enjoy your sleepover on Sunday?”

I nearly spit out my tea at my mom’s question. I hadn’t realized people actually did that when they were shocked. It was dangerous, really. I mean, her question had come so suddenly that even if I hadn’t spit out my tea, I’d still managed to let some of it go down the wrong pipe. As I sat there hacking up a lung, Nanami-san rubbed my back slowly and asked, “Yoshin, are you okay?”

Still unable to speak, I flashed Nanami-san a thumbs-up as I continued coughing. Even so, she continued gently rubbing my back until my cough subsided.

Once I'd calmed down, my mom opened her mouth again. "Did you enjoy your sleepover?" she said.

"You don't have to repeat yourself. Yes, I enjoyed it. What of it?" I said to my mother, who was asking me the same thing all over again. Recognizing just how childish I was being, I glanced at Nanami-san next to me, but she seemed to be enjoying the scene.

"It's so refreshing to see you with a different tone and attitude," she said.

She really was enjoying herself. I couldn't explain it, but having my behavior pointed out to me was embarrassing. Putting up a front with mom also seemed kind of weird, though.

"I just had no idea my son would do such a thing to a young lady he hadn't even married yet. I thought that I should perhaps give him a good scolding."

I nearly spat out my tea again. A good ol' scolding—one that was completely deserved. I couldn't talk back if *that* was the route she was going to take. *It's too late to do anything about it now*, I thought. But if my mom knew, then Tomoko-san must have told her. When I stole a glance at Nanami-san's mother, she was beaming broadly and quickly flashed me a thumbs-up. She was totally enjoying herself. There was nothing I could say.

"Just for the record, does Nanami-san know about it?" my mom asked. She'd chosen to phrase the question vaguely on purpose. Doing so might have been my mom's way of being considerate, but Nanami-san flushed red and nodded silently in response.

"I see, so you do know. I apologize for my son's actions."

"No, um, uh..." Nanami-san was looking down at her lap, wringing her hands together awkwardly. Then, though stammering, she declared to my mom, "I didn't dislike it. In fact, it made me happy."

As I was sitting in the seat next to her, a torrent of sweat exploded out of me at once. Nanami-san covered her face with both her hands, too embarrassed to look up. Once my downpour of sweat had subsided, I glanced at Nanami-san and turned red myself. She and I both grew silent, and my mom sighed.

"I knew I should have called immediately to ask for all the details. I hate business trips so much! To think things have heated up so much while we were both gone... You youngsters really do progress quickly."

"What are you saying?" I exclaimed. Mom was freaking me out. Even if she had asked, I wouldn't have told her. I also wanted to

stop her from asking Nanami-san instead, but I didn't really stand a chance.

Just as I started wondering for a second time why my mom was here in the first place, I recalled her statement from earlier. *Hot springs... Didn't she say we were going?*

"So, therefore, what do you say?" mom asked. "Shall we go to the hot springs?"

I had no idea what the "therefore" was about, but there she was, repeating herself again. As both Nanami-san and I sat in silence with our heads tilted, mom—in a rare fashion—seemed to panic a bit as a drop of nervous sweat trickled down her face.

"Oh? Don't tell me you dislike hot springs, Nanami-san. Yoshin, you tend to like them, don't you?" she asked.

At my mom's sudden display of timidity, Nanami-san replied in the affirmative, as if trying to make her feel better. "Oh, no, I do like hot springs," she said.

As for me, though it might have been a bit mean of me, I went ahead and replied honestly. "That was such a long time ago, though. I haven't been to one in a while, so I really can't say."

I mean, I don't think I'd gone to a hot spring with my parents since I was in elementary school. Back during middle school, I'd been obsessed with games, and it went without saying that we hadn't taken such a trip after I'd started high school.

My parents were as busy as most parents are, and I understood that taking trips wasn't all that easy for us. Plus, it wasn't like I really wanted to go on a trip. If you asked me if I liked hot springs, well... If we're just talking about a big bath, then isn't a public bathhouse pretty much the same thing? That's my general sentiment, though it might anger folks who really like bathing there.

When she heard my response, though, my mom put on a serious expression. I mean, her expression was always serious, but I detected a kind of pressure in this one. As I sat there slightly intimidated by that pressure, my mom opened her mouth slowly and said, "Yoshin, until now you haven't really engaged that much with other people. That is, of course, your personal choice, and I have respected that until now. I have always left your decisions in life up to you."

"What are you saying all of a sudden?" I asked, confused.

My mother, however, simply straightened her posture and took a sip of her tea in silence. Letting her drink slide down her throat, she sighed softly and continued. "But if you're going to be in a relationship with Nanami-san—if you're going to stay with her—then I believe there is a need for you to properly develop strong relationships with other people. And for that, you need to go to many different places and expand your horizons."

“Is that what the hot springs are all about?” I asked dubiously.

“That’s right. You go on this trip together and deepen your relationship. It should also broaden your perspective and contribute to your future growth,” she said.

“What’s your real intention?” I asked finally.

My mom fell silent and didn’t answer. I felt like she was really forcing the logic here. I mean, no one needed to go to the hot springs to expand their horizons. As I sat there looking at my mom for a minute, I noticed her slowly running her finger along the temple of her glasses. The gesture was a subtle tell of hers.

That meant her earlier statements were, in fact, excuses.

Knowing that, I decided I should stick to my original plan of going on a regular date with Nanami-san, but as I started to explain as much to mom, she made one final move to shake me.

“Let me rephrase that. Wouldn’t you like to see Nanami-san fresh out of the bath, wearing a yukata?”

The moment I heard that, the image flashed through my mind.
Fresh out of the bath... Fresh out of the bath, you say?

The camisole from the other evening had been really cute, but also so revealing that I hadn’t known where to look. A yukata, however, was a traditional Japanese garment that had the ability to bring out the sensuality of its wearer without showing a great deal of skin. Anyone who’d seen an online-game character wearing a yukata as part of their summer costume would immediately understand.

Was she really saying Nanami-san would wear a yukata? A yukata, which would allow me to look at her all I wanted, without worrying about where to rest my gaze?

My resolve wavered. When I glanced over at Nanami-san, it seemed she’d glanced over at me too, and our eyes met.

“What do you wanna do, Nanami-san?” I asked her, tentatively. “We were talking about what to do for our date this weekend. Technically going to the hot springs is a possibility, but the fact that it’s with my parents is a bit...”

“I think it’s a great idea! I haven’t been to the hot springs in a while, and I’d love to wear a yukata. You’re gonna wear one too, right? You will, right?!”

A wave of pressure swept over me from Nanami-san’s direction. I might even venture to say that it was more than what I felt coming from my mom.

I supposed I would wear one too. When I nodded wordlessly, I thought I saw Nanami-san’s eyes twinkle a bit. Had I just imagined it? Yeah, as long as Nanami-san was okay with it, I had no objections either. However, I still wasn’t convinced by the part about my parents being there with us.

“There’s no need to worry,” my mom suddenly said, grinning as if she saw right through me. It was the first time I’d seen her wear such an expression—a look that screamed to the world that she was scheming something. “Naturally, once we’re there, you two will have to be left to your own devices. Your father and I will be off on our own date.”

“Your father and Saya and I will also plan our own activities, so you don’t need to worry about us either,” Tomoko-san added.

I didn’t really need to hear that last bit about my parents’ date. But seriously, weren’t parents usually the ones to put a stop to plans like these? I could say the same about Tomoko-san the other day. Why were our parents always so encouraging? They kind of scared me.

As I was sitting there, unnerved, mom finally said something truthful that made the trip hard to refuse. “The real reason for all this is that you have been so taken care of by the Barato family, despite Nanami-san being your girlfriend. I felt so bad about not being able to show my appreciation that I wanted to plan this little trip.”

The Barato family really had gone above and beyond for me. If my parents were proposing that this trip was a way to say thank you to them for that, then...

I mean, they were saying that we were all going to go around separately once we were there. Plus, Nanami-san and I wouldn’t be able to go away together if not for an opportunity like this. Yeah, I decided to accept the proposal.

“I get it,” I said. “I’ll take you up on the offer. Is that okay with you, Nanami-san?”

“Yep! A trip with you’s gonna be so much fun! Thank you for this, Shinobu-san!”

I was glad Nanami-san was happy. Indeed—I’d never thought we’d get to go on a trip like this. The more I thought about it, the better the idea seemed. Trying to go on an overnight trip as high schoolers usually wasn’t possible unless the parents were involved.

“I’m so glad all my hard work didn’t go to waste,” mom said. “When I heard about the sleepover you two had, I wanted to plan something too.”

Tomoko-san nodded. “I’m happy for you, Shinobu-san. You seemed really bummed out about missing out on all the action.”

“Thanks. It’s still true that this is our thanks to you and your family. Let’s be sure to enjoy this trip.”

So that was her real intention... No, with my mom, both of those were probably both her real intentions. She wanted to bear witness to a sleepover event with me and Nanami-san, *and* she wanted to thank the Barato family. She had probably been trying to fulfill both of those desires at the same time, and Tomoko-san had gone along with it. *Way*

to go, *both of you*.

“So, where are we going? And what time are we leaving tomorrow?” I asked.

Given that things had turned out this way, the only thing left to do was to enjoy the trip. Since I couldn’t look up anything if I didn’t know where we were going, I’d asked without really thinking. I soon realized, though, that I had underestimated them—adults that were hell-bent on enjoying an event they’d planned—as well as the momentum and enthusiasm of two families that were all about having a good time.

“We’re leaving right now,” mom said.

“Excuse me?” I blurted.

At that moment, as if two certain someones had been waiting for my mother’s words, I heard footsteps coming from outside the front door. Tomoko-san was smiling happily, and my mom was clenching her fist in triumph.

“I’m home! Oh, welcome, Shinobu-san. Are you all set?” Genichiro-san asked.

“Me too! Jeez, I can finally blab. Seriously, I’ve wanted to talk about it for so long,” Saya-chan said.

Both of them must have already known about the trip. Of course. It seemed the only ones who hadn’t known were me and Nanami-san.

“All right, we’re off!”

“Let’s do this!”

Everyone except for me and Nanami-san raised their fists and shouted in excitement. All the two of us could do was to watch them, completely dumbfounded.



In the end, we couldn’t depart right away, because Nanami-san and I still had to get ready. Our families had already packed the majority of our things for us, but there were smaller things that we had to pack ourselves—plus we both had to “get ready” emotionally.

While I packed, I hurriedly gave a rundown of the situation to Baron-san and co.

Canyon: What should I do? We’ve been roped into a trip with both of our families!

Baron: Isn’t that the kind of thing that’s meant to happen post-wedding?

Peach: I’m not really sure what’s going on. All I can say is good luck!

Yeah, I’d realized as much after I’d agreed to go on the trip: a trip

with both families would be more appropriate *after* we got married.

“How did this happen?”

“Wh-What’s wrong, Yoshin-kun?”

My thoughts had spilled right out of my mouth in the form of actual words. Genichiro-san, who was driving, had heard them perfectly clearly. Panicking a bit, I straightened my posture so that I was no longer looking down at my knees.

Since Genichiro-san always drove me home, sitting in the passenger seat next to him was normally no big deal. Today, though, I felt more nervous than usual.

“Uh, no, it’s nothing. Apologies for my mother,” I said to him.

Baron-san had once told me that a poorly executed surprise could actually backfire. I was learning that fact the hard way this time, all thanks to mom. That was why I felt so nervous. Actually, though, maybe the surprise had only backfired on me and Nanami-san. After all, we were the only ones surprised.

Genichiro-san didn’t seem to mind at all. He just laughed in a somewhat exaggerated manner. “No, no. It’s been a while since we last went on a trip like this, so I’m looking forward to it. I can’t thank your mother enough for planning this for us.”

“Just out of curiosity, how long ago did she start planning it?” I asked.

“I think she started the day after you stayed over. Shinobu-san insisted, saying she wanted to thank us for the time we were spending together. We told her she really didn’t need to do that, but in the end she won us over.”

Had she really been planning this trip for that long? I was surprised to think just how much time had passed without me and Nanami-san hearing a peep about it. “But even then, leaving today is... It’s a pretty long drive, isn’t it? I feel bad.”

“Really? I used to drive a lot at night when I was younger. I enjoy it, plus the view can be pretty spectacular.”

Genichiro-san really did seem to be having fun driving. I didn’t have much interest in it, so I couldn’t say whether that enjoyment applied to many people. Even though I liked racing games, I knew nothing about proper driving. I guess that was because I’d never been on a trip like this before.

I peered out from the passenger seat window, thinking about his comment. The sun hadn’t completely set yet, so a faint orange light filled the sky. I wondered if the sky seemed even brighter than during the daytime because the sunlight was shining more directly into my eyes. My eyeballs would probably get fried if I continued staring, but it was probably my first time seeing the sunset like this. It made me feel a slight sense of nostalgia.

I wished I could have shared the view with Nanami-san, but she wasn't in this car at the moment. This car was currently carrying me, Genichiro-san, and—

"Mom, do you want a snack? Oh, do you want one too, onii-chan?"

"Oh, thanks, Saya-chan."

"Saya, how about giving some to your good ol' dad?"

"Don't worry, dear. I'll feed you. Here, say 'aah.'"

Saya-chan and Tomoko-san were sitting together in the back seat. I was currently riding with the Barato family, all by myself. It was no wonder I felt so nervous.

How is Nanami-san doing in the other car, all alone with mom?

"You should try going on a drive once you get your driver's license, Yoshin-kun. It's fun. You'll get into it," Genichiro-san remarked.

"I don't know. Somehow it doesn't really click in my head."

"That's young people these days for you—growing less interested in cars. But aren't you looking forward to taking Nanami out for a drive? When I was young, I couldn't wait to take my wife places."

"Oh, sweetheart," Tomoko-san said from the back seat. She actually sounded a little bit embarrassed, which was rare.

Taking Nanami-san out for a drive, huh? I guess that does sound pretty good. It'll let us go to all sorts of new places together. That said, I still can't get my head around wanting to drive.

I tried imagining it: Nanami-san sitting in the passenger seat of the car and me driving her around. We'd go to the beach or to the mountains. She would laugh happily beside me, eating a snack or feeding me too...

But that was all in my head. In reality, I'd be too distracted to drive her safely, which was totally out of the question.

Still, I felt like I understood why going for a drive was kind of cool. *How many years is it before I can get a license?* I wondered. *Does our high school allow students to get them? Maybe I should look into it when I get home.*

Suddenly, I found myself looking forward to being able to drive. I keep saying driving isn't my kind of thing, but when Nanami-san was involved, I became all about the idea. I couldn't tell if that was good or bad.

"Are you sure you're doing all right, Yoshin-kun?" Genichiro-san asked. "I'm sure you would've preferred to ride with Nanami."

"Oh, of course. I'm fine. I'll be with Nanami-san the whole time once we get there, plus my mom said she wanted to chat with her and all that."

Nanami-san was riding in the car driven by my mother. Mom had

said she wanted to talk with Nanami-san, but I couldn't help but wonder what she wanted to talk with her about. Whatever it was, I sure hoped mom wasn't saying anything weird. I knew it was too late to change cars now, but perhaps letting Nanami-san travel with mom hadn't been the best idea. What was my mom asking, and what was Nanami-san saying back? Just thinking about it unnerved me.

Seeing me sigh, Genichiro-san laughed once more. The two women in the back seat were also laughing. But regardless of whether they knew what I was thinking or not, hearing them laugh made me start laughing too.

"Anyway, we can switch around when we stop somewhere to take a break. That way, Nanami can hop in here too. Until then, though, let's just have a little fun. Say, do you want to hear stories about Nanami from when she was a kid?" Genichiro-san asked.

"I'd like that, but is it really okay for me to hear?"

"Well, I guess I'll just share stuff she'll be okay with. I've got a ton of adorable stories about her."

"Oh, I have cute stories about onee-chan too," Saya-chan piped up.

"Well then, shall we share a few juicy details?" Tomoko-san added.

Even though I felt kind of bad, the thought of hearing about all of Nanami-san's cute episodes made me excited nonetheless.



"Shinobu-san, what kind of a place will we be staying at?"

"It's a place with a really nice view from the hot springs. Especially at night, the scenery when you're taking a bath is something else. I think you'll like it."

"I'm looking forward to it! Have you been there before?"

"I have. My husband and I have a lot of memories there, so I'm glad I got to invite everyone to go with us this time."

At that moment, for various reasons, I was by myself with Shinobu-san. I had thought I might get nervous being alone with Yoshin's mother, but that wasn't the case at all. She was really easy to talk to.

When I met her for the first time, I'd been so stunned that I'd said all sorts of weird things. When I thought back to that time, I felt like I could've acted a little differently.

I glanced over at Shinobu-san as she drove. Her serious gaze reminded me of Yoshin. His mom was the kind of woman you could call cool, or even handsome. Yoshin had said that his personality was a lot like his mother's, but I thought his eyes looked a lot like hers too.

"Just so you know, they also have a reservable family bath, so if

you wanted to, you could take a bath together,” Shinobu-san said.

“We can’t do that!” I exclaimed.

I’d been so shocked by Shinobu-san’s suggestion that I’d ended up responding like I would to my friends. I quickly covered my mouth, but Shinobu-san laughed, enjoying my response.

Even the way she suddenly said things to give me heart attacks was very much like Yoshin. Actually, no—it was Yoshin that was like his mother. *But even Yoshin wouldn’t say something like this, would he?* I was starting to get confused.

Still, taking a bath with Yoshin would be— Wait, a bath?! Are two high schoolers allowed to be together in the family bath?! No, that can’t possibly be allowed, right? Don’t parents usually stop their kids from doing things like that?

“I’m just teasing. It’s still a little early for two high schoolers to be taking a bath together.”

“Jeez! Shinobu-san!”

Shinobu-san raised the corners of her mouth and laughed even more as she watched me turn beet red. I knew she was teasing me, but it was kind of unfair—how could she be cool, but really cute like this as well?

Wait, didn’t she just say “it’s still a little early”? Does that mean it’ll be possible in the future? Like when?

I started imagining taking a bath with Yoshin—and promptly made myself all flustered. Shinobu-san kept a slight smile on her face. It seemed I wasn’t going to get to hear what she was thinking. I had to press my hands to my cheeks to calm down. I could feel the heat of my face on my palms. *I must be super red right now.*

“I’m sorry, Nanami-san.”

Shinobu-san’s voice was suddenly much gentler than before. Surprised by the unexpected apology, I tilted my head, my hands still pressed to my cheeks. *Is she apologizing for her joke from a moment ago?* I wondered, but that wasn’t the reason at all.

“I’m sure you would’ve preferred to ride with Yoshin, but I really wanted the opportunity to speak with you.”

“It’s totally fine. I’ll get to spend time with him the whole time we’re there, and I could even talk with him on the phone if I wanted to.”

Ah, that’s right. Shinobu-san asked me to ride in her car because she wanted to talk with me, but what was it she wanted to talk about?

I’d been thinking that I wanted to get to know Yoshin’s mother better, so her invitation to chat in her car had been perfect. Shinobu-san seemed cool at a glance, but I knew she was also really sweet. Maybe that’s not the kind of thing I should be saying about my boyfriend’s mother, though.

Shinobu-san really was really different from my own mom. That was probably why I never expected the two of them to get along so much.

“Also, I’m sorry about what my son did. I can’t believe he kissed a sleeping girl. It was taking advantage of someone’s vulnerability.”

I wondered why she thought she still needed to apologize. I’d already told her I didn’t mind the kiss at all and that it had actually made me happy. Perhaps, as his mother, she felt like she should apologize to me, but...

“I mean, really, he should’ve kissed you while you were awake, not while you were sleeping. That son of mine’s such a late bloomer.”

“Is that what you wanted to say?!”

Her apology had meant something totally different from what I’d imagined. Maybe that was because I’d told her I didn’t dislike it. Still, her comment made me laugh. Shinobu-san laughed along with me, then she paused for a moment, swapping to a more serious tone.

“How is your relationship with Yoshin going, anyway? Is he being kind to you? I never thought he’d get a girlfriend, so I was caught off guard. Please excuse my behavior when we first met.”

She spoke in a kind voice—a voice different from her earlier cool tone. I could tell she was concerned about Yoshin and me, which really warmed my heart.

“Not at all. I must have seemed so rude then too...”

Midsentence, though, I suddenly remembered. The time Shinobu-san and I had first met, Yoshin had kissed me on the cheek. *Huh? Has Shinobu-san forgotten about that?* I rubbed the spot where his lips had touched my cheek.

At that moment, the traffic light turned red, and the car came to a stop. Shinobu-san glanced at me without turning her head. “Oh, come to think of it, he *did* kiss you while you were awake. Just on the cheek, though. I really was confused back then.”

She’d remembered! No, it wasn’t a bad thing, but back then, I’d been totally distracted by the fact that she thought I was a rental girlfriend. Now that I actually stopped to think about it, I became super embarrassed.

“Until Yoshin started elementary school, he used to bring his friends to our house,” Shinobu-san said suddenly. “He got along with both boys and girls, and he always used to prefer playing outside over playing video games.”

“Really?”

Rather than delving into the details of the kiss at our first meeting, Shinobu-san had begun talking about Yoshin when he was a kid. It was a story I probably wouldn’t be able to hear from him.

My question of whether it was okay for me to hear the story and

my desire to hear it were competing with each other inside of me, yet I grew silent, unable to interrupt Shinobu-san as she spoke. The light turned green, and the car started moving again.

“My husband and I were both working, so he must have been lonely, but he told us he was fine because he was playing with his friends. He even smiled while he said that.”

Maybe it was rude of me to think this, but that wasn't the Yoshin I could've pictured, given the way he'd been just a few weeks ago. I mean, he'd always been quiet, and he never participated in fun activities in class. He'd always been by himself—a classmate I'd never spoken to.

I was only able to describe that version of Yoshin as a thing of the past because we were dating now. Had we not started dating, I had a feeling that I would've never paid any attention to him. The thought alone frightened me.

“He was so different from how he is now, wasn't he?” Shinobu-san said, smiling forlornly. I couldn't find the words to respond. I couldn't even nod or shake my head. All I could do was to stay silent and listen to her story.

Shinobu-san continued her story. I felt like the car sped up slightly, but I wasn't looking out the window, so I couldn't know for sure. Looking at Shinobu-san's expression, though, that was the feeling that I got.

“Then, one day, he just stopped playing with his friends all of a sudden. When we got home, he was always there by himself. He stopped playing outside, and he started playing alone in the house more and more.”

“All of a sudden? Did something happen?” I asked.

“He never told us. We asked his teacher about it at school, but we were told that Yoshin spoke with his friends like normal in class and that he was a very good kid.”

The story sure was strange. Even though nothing seemed to have changed, his actions were completely different from what they used to be. My imagination started running in unpleasant directions.

“Could he have been bullied?” I asked.

“We suspected that, but even though we looked into it, we couldn't find anything. Even when we asked him, he said nothing had happened.”

I was relieved that he hadn't been bullied, but I still had questions. At the same time, I felt a tinge of sadness because I realized I actually didn't know anything about Yoshin. I knew that what I was hearing about was a thing of the past, but I still felt that way.

I wanted to know what had happened, but I didn't think he'd tell me something he hadn't even shared with his parents. Even so, if he

had been hurt in any way, I wanted to help him heal.

“But one time, he had a huge fight with his father. Yoshin told my husband that he was comfortable being alone and to just leave him be.”

“Really? Yoshin actually gets mad? I didn’t expect that at all.”

“I’m sure the spike in his mood was partially down to adolescent angst, but I actually felt kind of relieved that they had that fight. It’s only normal to fight and to tell each other what we actually want to say.” Shinobu-san smiled a bit sadly, thinking back on the past. She almost looked like she was about to cry, which made my heart begin to ache. She looked at me, and her sad smile softened. “I’m sorry to tell you such a gloomy story. I wanted to tell you how much I appreciate you, but I did so in such a roundabout way.”

“Appreciate me? But I haven’t—”

I haven’t done anything. It was true—I hadn’t been able to do anything for him. Even though I always felt like I wanted to do something for him, I always received more than double what I gave, but Shinobu-san, still facing forward, quietly shook her head.

“That’s not the case at all. When I see Yoshin with you, I feel like I’m seeing him as he used to be, when he was so active and social all those years ago. My husband and I were both so happy, we thought we might cry.”

Yoshin as he used to be...

Thinking about it, I could see that Yoshin really was a proactive guy. He’d helped me; he’d taken me out on a date; and he’d even kissed me.

“We respected Yoshin’s wishes, but we weren’t able to change our son. We’re pathetic as parents, really.”

I wanted to tell her that that wasn’t the case at all. I wanted to tell her that the fact that Yoshin had grown into such a wonderful person was most definitely because of her and her husband. I knew it was a presumptuous opinion coming from a kid like me, but even still, I wanted to tell her.

But I couldn’t.

When I heard what Shinobu-san said next, I became speechless.

“That’s why I wanted to thank you for choosing my son, Nanami-san. Because of you, Yoshin was able to change. My son is so lucky to be in a relationship with you.”

When I heard that, my heart skipped a beat. I began to sweat. My entire body was drained of warmth. My fingertips were so cold that I felt like I’d thrust them into a bucket of ice.

No. That’s not it at all.

I hadn’t chosen Yoshin. I’d only confessed to him because I’d been told to. It had been through no will of my own. Now, I would

probably confess to him with all my heart, but still, I wasn't the one who'd chosen him.

I wanted to tell her, but I couldn't. I just clasped my hands tightly in front of my chest. When she saw me, Shinobu-san tilted her head, confused.

I breathed in and out—very, very slowly.



“Nanami-san, are you all right? I’m sorry I brought up such a strange topic even though we’re supposed to be on a happy trip.”

Shinobu-san was worried about me. When she expressed her concern, I felt even worse. I started thinking about the topic that I’d been consciously pushing out of my head lately.

I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I thought, apologizing in my mind.

“I’m fine. Since I started dating Yoshin, I’ve changed too. I was able to change. That’s why I should be the one to say thank you.”

“I see. Then my son certainly is very lucky. I hope you two can enjoy yourselves while we’re on the trip.”

“Thank you,” I said.

I’m sorry. I internally apologized not only to Shinobu-san but to Yoshin’s father, even though he wasn’t there with us.

When all is said and done, I’ll apologize to you both, one more time. No matter what happens then, I’ll be fine with it. So please, please, let us stay together this way, for just a short while longer.

Being selfish, I prayed with all my heart.

From then on, as she drove, Shinobu-san told me all sorts of adorable stories about the younger Yoshin. I felt my self-loathing slowly dissipating as I listened to her and wanted to kick myself for being so easy on myself. Not wanting to rain on everyone else’s parade, though, I locked my feelings away where they couldn’t come out.



The journey there ended up being a lot shorter than I’d expected.

Everything had been a blast—going to a completely unknown place to have dinner, the quick rest stops, et cetera. Going to a convenience store at night also felt strangely exciting. Was that because I was doing something different from usual, or because everyone else was there with me?

We chatted excitedly as we bought snacks and drinks. Even though I usually hated going out, I was starting to think that traveling with other people wasn’t so bad after all.

I became concerned, though, when Nanami-san was looking a little down at the first rest stop. On the surface, she looked like her usual self, but something about her seemed off. When I asked her what she’d talked about with my mom, she told me they’d chatted about me when I was younger.

Honestly, I wanted to ask them to give me a break. I couldn’t say anything, though, because I’d been hearing all sorts of cute stories about Nanami-san’s childhood from Genichiro-san and the others.

“You guys were talking about that too, huh?”

“Seems like it. So what did she tell you?” I asked.

We’d asked each other questions as if trying to check the damage done, but then we looked at each other and laughed, as if to change the subject. I really wanted to know what my mom had told her, but I was also too scared to ask. Contradictory feelings welled up in my heart—though I wasn’t sure if that was what you’d call them.

From that point on, Nanami-san and I stayed together the remainder of the way. Part of that was to make sure that mom wasn’t going to tell Nanami-san any more weird stuff. Even more, though, I was worried.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but Nanami-san seemed kind of sad. Given that this was supposed to be a fun trip, I wanted to make sure she was enjoying herself. Sitting next to her, I squeezed her hand in reassurance. She made fun of me a little, but I didn’t let go. Perhaps thanks to that, by the time we arrived, I felt like she was back to her usual self.

“Are you okay, Nanami-san?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she said. “Wow, we’re finally here.”

“I hadn’t driven such a long distance in quite some time. We’ve come a long, long way together, or so they say,” Genichiro-san said as he got out of the car.

“What’s that, Genichiro-san?”

“Ah, young people wouldn’t know that one, huh?” He stretched and looked up at the hotel. The building was quite large. I looked up at it alongside Genichiro-san.

“Hey, Yoshin, doesn’t this hotel look a little *too* nice?” Nanami-san asked. “Have you stayed here before?”

“Nope. I’m pretty sure I’ve never stayed anywhere so nice.”

This hotel was way fancier than the hotel we’d stayed at during our graduation trip in middle school. The building itself seemed high-class. Nanami-san and I each took a step backward, feeling like we didn’t belong.

“Do you think I’m okay like this? They won’t have a dress code, right?” Nanami-san asked me nervously.

“I’m just in my regular clothes too. I wonder if I’ll be let in without my tie...”

Nanami-san was wearing a slightly fuzzy outfit that looked like loungewear, while I was wearing a regular T-shirt and jeans. We couldn’t help feeling like our clothes didn’t match such a fancy hotel.

Although I’d gotten all flustered and started talking about neckties, that must just be for expensive restaurants and those kinds of things. Hotels shouldn’t have dress codes.

For now, Nanami-san and I decided to walk into the hotel together. The front desk was surrounded by a calm atmosphere. Warm

lighting illuminated our surroundings. When I looked around, I saw a familiar figure sitting on a couch nearby. He seemed to notice us too, as he got up and started walking over.

“Hey, looks like you all made it. Holding hands, huh? I’m glad to see that you two are doing well.” My dad, still in his suit, greeted us with a teasing remark.

“Hey, dad,” I replied. Before, Nanami-san and I would’ve let go of each other’s hands immediately, but now, we stayed as we were. My dad looked at us, seeming pleased.

“You’re here early,” I said. “I thought you were gonna join us later.”

“I’m working nearby. Oh, I’ve already checked us in. Here’s the key to the room,” he said, handing me a card.

A key card, huh? I’ve heard loads about people who lost theirs and couldn’t get back into their rooms. I should be careful.

With the business out of the way, dad smiled softly at Nanami-san. Nanami-san seemed to shake a little; she squeezed my hand tightly.

“It’s nice to see you again, Nanami-san. Thank you for taking care of Yoshin. I hope we can all have fun together.”

“Th-Thank you for letting Yoshin spend time with me! And thank you for inviting us to such a gorgeous place.”

Nanami-san let go of my hand and bowed to my dad, who laughed and told her not to think anything of it. Given that even I couldn’t seem to calm down, Nanami-san must have been having a harder time. Even after she raised her head, she seemed sort of nervous.

As my dad started making his way over to my mom and Genichiro-san and everyone, I realized that the key card was still in my hand. I couldn’t help staring at it.

“Wow, that totally freaked me out,” Nanami-san mumbled, sighing as she placed her hand on her chest. When I looked at her more closely, I saw she was blushing and even perspiring a bit on her cheeks. I didn’t realize that she’d been *that* nervous.

“Does my dad still make you nervous? You seemed fine with mom.”

“Yeah, I mean, he’s an adult man. Of course I’d be nervous.”

“I guess you are uncomfortable around men. So even my dad counts, huh?”

I thought she’d gotten more used to guys because of me, but maybe she still couldn’t really be around people she didn’t have much contact with. That was what I was thinking, anyway, but it seemed that wasn’t the case. What she said next was fairly unexpected.

“There is that, but you look kind of like your dad, you know? When I think that you’re gonna look like that one day, my heart starts

beating faster.”

Wow, that gave me mixed feelings. Do I really look like my dad? No, wait. Even more than that, the fact that her heart starts beating faster makes me feel even stranger.

I looked over at my dad. He was talking to my mom and Nanami-san’s family. He was even talking and laughing with Saya-chan. It was amazing, really—he’d gotten to know them in no time. Unlike me, my dad was very social. I’d heard he was pretty close with people at his work too. Didn’t he feel like things like that were a bother?

I remembered having a huge fight with him over that when I was in middle school. The fight had completely been my fault. Even during that fight, though, my dad had stayed so calm. It had almost been like he’d just been giving me advice.

My dad and I only *looked* alike. Inside, we were completely different.

Oh, yeah. I even remembered him asking if I wanted to go camping with him. I think in the end I’d told him no because it seemed like too much trouble. I felt like now, though, I would be able to tell him sincerely that I wanted to go with him. Perhaps that, too, was due to Nanami-san’s influence.

I glanced at Nanami-san, who was standing next to me. Feeling my gaze, she looked back at me and tilted her head.

“I hope I can be as cool as my dad one day,” I muttered.

Nanami-san laughed at my comment. “You’ll be fine. Of course you’re gonna be a cool adult. You’re already cool,” she said as she looked up at me from below.

Not used to hearing that, I felt my face getting hot. Nanami-san watched me, seemingly enjoying the situation. I had to take my eyes off of her and instead look toward my dad. He seemed to notice me looking at him, because he looked back.

“It’s getting too late to go out, but you should check out the view from the room. It’s really impressive,” he said.

What he’d said was true—we couldn’t stand around by the front desk forever. It was time we headed to our room and put our stuff down.

Nanami-san and I took each other’s hand again and started walking, but just then, dad started talking. “Oh, right. Don’t do anything funny just because you two are alone in the room. Keep it to enjoying the scenery, okay?”

“I know that already!” I exclaimed, nearly tripping over my own feet. Everyone, including my dad, was watching and laughing, amused by my dad’s comment. *Jeez, I can’t believe they’re all laughing*, I thought.

Just then, though, I saw that even Nanami-san was laughing next

to me. She seemed to find my riled up self amusing. *What was so funny about it?* I wondered. I held my head in my hand as she and I made our way to the room.

Before we left, we'd asked Saya-chan if she wanted to come with us, but she'd flat out refused, saying, "Uh, why would I go with you guys to see the view? Is this some kind of torture?"

I hadn't expected to have a trip to our room be likened to torture. It seemed Saya-chan was getting attached to my mom, though. The two of them were chatting excitedly.

Given that Saya-chan had rejected us, Nanami-san and I decided to go to the room by ourselves. The room number was 1031, which seemed like a room on a floor high up.

We got in the elevator and pressed the button to our floor. The elevator immediately started to climb as my body became enveloped in that floating feeling unique to elevators. I didn't know what it was, but my heart was beating faster even though all we were doing was heading up to the room. What was going on? Why was my heart pounding so hard?

It seemed Nanami-san was feeling the same way. Since getting in the elevator, she'd grown completely silent. She was looking down at the floor, both cheeks pink.

I tried to say something to her, but for some reason I couldn't speak. My mouth felt dry, and my throat felt parched. I was making strange sounds as I breathed. The elevator ride felt so long that I thought we were going to be stuck inside. Eventually, the dinging sound indicated we'd reached the right floor.

The moment we heard that sound, we both flinched.

My heart ached. My body trembled. My palms were sweating. Was Nanami-san feeling okay? When I turned slightly to look at her, she was staring straight at the elevator door.

Then the doors slowly opened, letting the light pour out.

When we stepped out, we felt the soft hallway carpet beneath our shoes. Neither one of us was able to move until the doors closed and we heard the elevator leave our floor.

"Sh- Shall we?" I said. I struggled to form the words. My voice cracked. When I spoke, though, Nanami-san nodded slowly.

Simply walking together felt like a difficult move to execute. Before I realized it, Nanami-san had linked her arm with mine. I felt like I could hear her heartbeat through the places our bodies touched.

That was when I finally realized why all this was happening.

We were nervous about the fact that we were going to a hotel room together—something that was inconceivable in our everyday lives. If we'd been going to any normal place, it would have been fine, but saying we were "going to a hotel room"... That was the problem,

because it made me unconsciously aware of *that*. The uncalled-for comment from my dad had brought it to my attention, and Nanami-san probably felt the same way. The closer we got to our room, the more slowly we walked.

Dammit, dad! Why'd you have to go and say something so weird? Am I gonna have to fight him again? Another fight, huh? The respect and admiration I'd felt for him a moment ago had completely shot out the window.

Step by step, we proceeded very slowly. As if we'd taken an unimaginably long journey, Nanami-san and I finally reached the door to our room. We gulped simultaneously. When I brought the key card slowly up to the lock, we heard a mechanical sound, followed by the sound of the door unlocking.

We're just entering our room. We have no intention of doing anything. We can't do anything. Then why are we so nervous? We can't even have a conversation with each other.

We entered the room together.

Since I didn't have much experience with other hotels, I didn't know whether the room was a normal one. There were two beds and a futon. The latter had already been prepared in the tatami area toward the back. That made three beds in total, which must have meant this was my family's room.

Nanami-san and I saw the inside of the room and sighed out loud, almost simultaneously. There was something funny about our reaction; we both looked at each other and laughed. Looking around at the room seemed to finally unravel the tension.

"This is a really pretty room. It feels so calm. The lights don't feel too bright either," Nanami-san said.

"Yeah. It looks like you can see the view from the windows back there. Wow, you can even see from here how stunning it is."

We were finally relaxed enough to be able to talk like we usually did. The exchange wasn't a long one, but we were nervous.

"Shall we go check out what we can see from the window?" I suggested.

"Yeah. I wonder what the view's like."

After setting our luggage down, Nanami-san and I approached the window together. It was in the tatami room, so we took our shoes off and walked in. We sat down by the window above the futon and looked outside.

"Wow..."

Before we realized it, the two of us had both let out a sound of awe.

Lights—the kind we'd only seen on television—lit up everything as far as the eye could see, shining almost too brightly. Lights of all

kinds leaped into our field of vision—light reflecting off of water and stationary ships, lights illuminating brick buildings, lights from cars passing by. We were both at a loss for words. Our eyes were glued to the view from our window.

Because the room was fairly dim, the lights outside felt even brighter, more beautiful. They lit up even the inside of our room. Of course even we were illuminated by them. I shifted my gaze to look at Nanami-san.

Her happy expression was illuminated by the nightscape. She looked beautiful. When she saw me looking at her, she turned to me and smiled. I smiled back.



Then her expression suddenly clouded. Or maybe it was more accurate to say that she looked panicked. Even as she continued looking out the window, she glanced behind herself from time to time. What was she looking at? When I turned around, I realized.

“Ah.”

The futon was lying there.

I quickly turned my gaze back to the window, but once I’d started thinking about it, I couldn’t help looking back too.

Nanami-san came gradually closer. She leaned her body against my shoulder and continued gazing out the window. Her weight felt comfortable against me, though I admit she felt really light.

After a while, her eyes came to rest on me. Becoming less concerned with the view and more concerned with her, I started gazing back.

There, we looked at each other and not at all at the view. It felt like the distance between us was drifting away. *Wait, are we actually getting closer?*

Her eyes glistened, and her cheeks flushed. We were so close, and yet I didn’t feel an ounce of the nervousness I’d felt earlier. Just as I was feeling incredibly peaceful...

We heard a loud noise coming from the entrance.

Nanami-san and I leaped up in shock and turned toward the direction of the noise. We were immediately confronted with the sight of everyone hiding, looking at us.

The loud noise seemed to have come from someone’s phone. Seeing as my mom was looking at my dad resentfully, it must have been his that had made the sound.

Still in shock, Nanami-san and I stared at the group, frozen extremely close to each other. When my mom noticed us looking at all of them, she cleared her throat as if to gather herself. Then, in her usual calm manner, she stated, “Do continue.”

“As if we could!” I screamed with all my might, covering Nanami-san’s ears with both hands.



I heard birds calling outside our window. Birds that I didn’t usually hear in my own neighborhood. Their calls sounded kind of like the cries of cats. Were they black-tailed gulls? I’d heard their calls sound like cats.

Hearing the bird calls, I woke up. It seemed I’d fallen asleep.

“Uuugh! All right, I’m awake,” I mumbled, still lying on the bed. The bed itself was softer than my bed back home, and I’d been able to sleep more soundly than I’d expected. *But what did I do last night,*

exactly?

In my still drowsy state, I vaguely recalled what had happened the night before. *Um, I'm pretty sure... Oh, right. I was watching the night view with Nanami-san when I realized everyone else was in the room too. Seriously, what a bunch of snoops.*

There were actually two key cards.

I'd assumed that there was only one. Thinking that no one else could enter the room, I'd unconsciously let my guard down and ended up having quite the moment with Nanami-san, right next to the futon. We hadn't actually done anything, but still, I'd learned that it was entirely possible to end up *almost* doing something even if that wasn't my intention.

After that, there'd been no way Nanami-san and I could have continued, so we'd all ended up heading to the hot springs. Then I'd come back to the room and lain down on one of the beds. The exhaustion of being on the road had worn me out more than I'd realized. I'd only meant to lie down, but before I knew it, I'd ended up falling asleep.

Now, where did I put my phone?

Still half asleep, I stretched out my arm to feel for my phone without lifting my head. All of a sudden, my palm brushed up against a softness that differed from the softness of the bed. *Hmm? What's this?*

I reflexively moved my palm.

"Nnggh..."

Huh?

As I felt the soft and comfortable sensation on my palm, I heard a gentle, feminine voice. I wanted to keep touching that softness forever, but...

Wait a minute!

My eyes snapped open as the thought crossed my mind that perhaps this was the real-life version of a very common trope. With my mind now completely clear, I sat bolt upright on the bed.

Nanami-san was sleeping next to me. When I very timidly glanced down at where my hand lay, fearing I'd crossed the line, I saw that I was indeed touching her—except I was touching her stomach.

"Phew, that scared me..."

I felt a rush of mixed feelings, including relief but also disappointment that it wasn't another body part of hers. Actually, it was good that it wasn't something else. There was nothing funny about touching her while she was sleeping.

But why is Nanami-san sleeping in the same bed as me?

When I looked at my own position on the bed, I realized that I was sleeping sideways on the bed. Nanami-san, too, was sleeping in the same way. She was wearing the yukata that came with the hotel

room, and it had come loose around her neck. The bed was fairly large, which was why we were able to sleep this way. The blanket, however, had slipped off of the both of us.

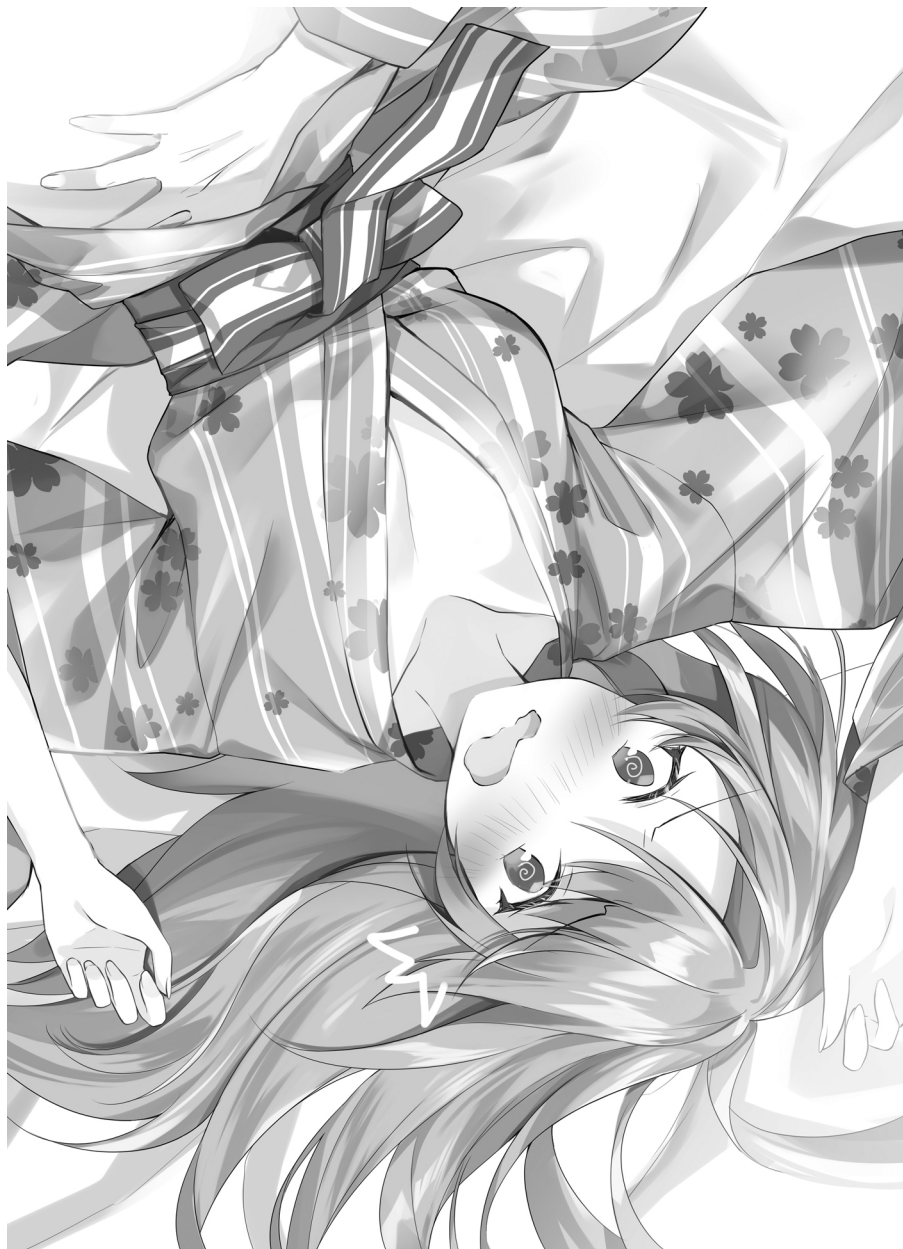
“Ngh... Oh, good morning, Yoshin. I guess we both fell asleep, huh?”

Nanami-san raised her head slightly and glanced over at me. She still seemed sleepy, with her eyes only half-open. When her gaze traveled down to her stomach, though, she froze in place.

Her eyes were glued to my hand, which was still resting on her stomach. *Shoot, I forgot to move my hand away.*

“Good morning, Nanami-san,” I mumbled.

“Huuuuuuh?!”



Nanami-san flew out of bed, sending my hand flying. I was a little sad that the warmth had left my palm, but this wasn't the time for mourning that. I mean, it was my own fault for touching her at all.

"Why are you touching my stomach?! A girl's stomach is completely off-limits!"

"Oh, no, I'm sorry. I was, uh, looking for my phone, and then when I stretched out my hand, you just happened to be there."

"Gosh... It would've been better if you'd just touched my boobs. I can't believe you went for my belly."

Wait, seriously?! What? Do girls really dislike having their stomachs touched so much that they'd rather guys touch their chests? I mean, I'm pretty sure girls don't usually like either, but... This was too much information too early in the morning; I couldn't process it all.

I apologized to Nanami-san once again, but she didn't respond. Instead, she muttered something softly as I continued to panic.

"Sorry, what was that?" I asked.

"How was it?" she said a little louder.

Huh? H-How was what? Is she asking for my opinion? At first, I didn't know how to respond. If I lied to her, I felt like she might end up sulking.

"It was nice and soft."

"No waaaaay! You idiot!"

I messed up! That was totally the wrong response! Nanami-san had turned completely red and was now hitting me with a pillow. I chose not to resist and simply accepted her attacks.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! But look, since you touched my stomach before, let's just call it even!"

"Seriously? I've gotten kind of fat, so I didn't want you to touch me there. I so didn't want you to!"

The poofy blows continued coming, though they were quite weak. Obviously, they didn't hurt at all; in fact, I kind of liked the playfulness of it all.

Had she gotten fat? I didn't think that at all. In fact, Nanami-san seemed skinny to me. When I tried to console her, she tossed the pillow aside. Then, all of a sudden, she said, "All right, let me touch yours now."

"Why would you wanna do that?! You touched it the other day, remember?!"

"I'm afraid I don't," she replied.

Nanami-san had now abandoned the pillow. As she began crawling toward me, both of her hands were moving as though they had minds of their own.

To be honest, even if Nanami-san did manage to tackle me, I

would most definitely be able to push her off of me. As a guy, I had more strength than she did. Mysteriously enough, though, I didn't feel a smidge of desire to actually do it. Well, maybe that wasn't so mysterious.

As Nanami-san and I kept messing around, we suddenly heard voices behind us.

"Aaagh... You guys are being too loud!"

"Oh, are you awake?"

That's right, there are two beds in this room, but didn't I hear two voices just now?

When I turned my head to look toward the other bed, I saw my mom and Saya-chan sleeping together. Nanami-san, too, saw the two of them and froze. *Wait, how did that happen?*

"Seriously, why do you have to be so lovey-dovey so early in the morning? Are you both in heat or something?" Saya-chan asked, yawning.

My mom also yawned and looked at each of us in turn. "Well then, if everyone's awake, how about we go get some breakfast? The buffet here is to die for."

As the two women got up, Nanami-san and I could only watch them, dumbfounded. It was, after all, her sister and my mother. They both thrust their fists out at me in response to a question I hadn't even articulated.

"We hit it off," mom said.

"I was chatting with Shinobu-san the whole time yesterday," Saya-chan added.

It wasn't much of an answer, but I couldn't bring myself to probe further. I was too scared to ask why my girlfriend's little sister and my own mom were sleeping together.

"We were sharing a bed because—"

"You don't have to explain!" I shouted, interrupting mom and sliding off the bed. Although the curtains were still closed, light was leaking through them already. The brightness was a pretty good sign that we'd get great weather today as well. *Yeah, it's time for a change of pace.*

That was when I saw my dad sleeping on the futon at the back of the room. *Oh, shoot. Is this because we hogged the bed? I feel really bad.*

"Don't worry yourself," mom said. "Your father was so excited about there being a futon set up in the tatami room that he insisted he sleep there."

Oh, is that so? Wait, how do you know everything I'm thinking? Compared to the chaos around me, though, that felt like a trivial matter.

After the turbulent breakfast that followed, Nanami-san and I finally found ourselves alone. Although I'd felt exhausted from the moment I'd woken up, I now felt completely reenergized. That was pretty convenient, to say the least.

As for the other members of our party, Tomoko-san and Genichiro-san had gone off together, while my parents and Saya-chan had taken off as a group of three. They all seemed to have places they wanted to visit. Saya-chan had become quite attached to my mom, whereas my mom was excited to have suddenly acquired the daughter she'd never had. She was also excited about the fact that Nanami-san was becoming somewhat jealous of Saya-chan, but that's a story for another day.

Before the trip, my mom had been saying she'd go on a date with my dad, but she'd ultimately decided that she could do that any other day during their business trip. With that in mind, she'd decided to take advantage of the time she would get to spend with Saya-chan during this trip. Saya-chan, herself, seemed to want to give her parents an opportunity to spend some time by themselves.

In other words, my mom's and Saya-chan's motives coincided with each other. *But were my parents really meeting up with each other outside of work too? I had no idea.*

As I sat there dumbfounded by the discovery, my dad started to speak. "We'd invite you to come along more, but every time we've tried, you said it was too much of a hassle."

That's right; it *was* too much of a hassle even when they offered to pick me up. I'd always declined their invitations, saying I wanted to complete the events in my game. I suppose humans are quick to forget inconvenient things.

Well, never mind. I should enjoy my time together with Nanami-san.

"So we're by ourselves, huh?" I said.

"We are, aren't we?" Nanami-san whispered, as if trying to take it all in. We'd come to a little bay area near the hotel. Nanami-san had her hair in one long braid which she'd draped over her shoulder, perhaps because we were by the sea.

She was wearing a light shirt, a miniskirt, and a small purse—an outfit that made it easier for her to walk around. I was wearing a T-shirt and a pair of chinos—casual, everyday wear. I know it sounds odd coming from me, someone who has zero interest in fashion, but I felt like we were dressed a little too plainly for a date.

There was actually a reason for the way we were dressed. Yesterday, while we were riding in the car together, Nanami-san and I had discovered an interesting place. We were on our way there now.

“This is pretty exciting, huh?” she said.

“I know it’s a little late to ask, but do I really need to be doing this too?”

“Yes! You said you’d do it with me!”

Yes, I most certainly did. Repeating this short exchange, we walked toward our destination—not in a rush, just in a very relaxed manner. The weather was nice, and it felt good just to walk together.

Really, though, I’d only said yes yesterday because I’d gotten carried away. To be real about it, I felt like this was something more up Nanami-san’s alley, not mine.

You might be wondering what I’m talking about. That would be—*Ah, we’re here. It was closer than we thought.*

“Wow, pretty!” Nanami-san exclaimed.

Before us stood a brick building that had a very retro vibe to it. This neighborhood had loads of brick buildings, but this one had a different feel. Nanami-san’s eyes sparkled with expectation from just looking at the building. To be precise, her expectations were about what was *inside* the building.

We walked inside and headed to the second floor. As we made our way up the stairs, an impressive collection of brightly colored clothes leaped out at us. There were so many different costumes.

We were in a clothing rental store.

This store in particular rented out not only normal clothes, but kimono, as well as Western dresses. They even had hakama from the Taisho romance era. They carried costumes for both men and women, and you could even rent swords with the Shinsengumi costumes.

Looking around the store, I saw a few other customers who had already changed into their costumes. They all seemed to be enjoying the experience. I assumed there would only be women here, but I was surprised to see several male customers as well.

“You’d better look forward to my grand transformation, Yoshin!”

“I certainly will.”

“Make sure you actually choose something too, okay?”

After reminding me of my assignment, Nanami-san skipped away to choose her costume. We’d already decided to surprise each other by choosing our costumes separately.

What should I choose? I should go for something that isn’t embarrassing for her to stand next to, right? A Shinsengumi outfit would be good if she were into that, but maybe that isn’t the ideal pick for a date.

I kind of wanted to try the sword out for myself, but I was probably better off restraining myself. After all, today was all about Nanami-san.

I chose a safe, light-gray kimono. Nanami-san had already had her heart set on a hakama, so I hoped I wouldn’t stand out too much next

to her. One of the store associates dressed me in no time, and when I was finished, Nanami-san happily ran toward me—Nanami-san wearing a hakama. She stopped in front of me and opened her mouth.

“Wow, Yoshin, you look so good in a kimono! You’re so handsome!”

Dang it, I wanted to be the one to give a compliment first! You look great too, Nanami-san. The reason I couldn’t was because Nanami-san had looked so beautiful as she’d run toward me that I’d been left totally speechless. I wished I could get used to that feeling, but I didn’t think I ever would.

I took a moment to study Nanami-san more closely.

She was wearing a navy-blue hakama patterned with pale-pink flowers. Her furisode—a type of kimono for young, unmarried women—was bright green, also with a floral design. *Are those plum blossoms, perhaps?* Just like when we’d arrived here, she had her hair in a braid that cascaded down over one shoulder.

“You look great too, Nanami-san,” I finally managed to say.

She responded to my comment by smiling one of her flowerlike smiles. She then lifted both of her hands and twirled happily. Seeing her cute gestures and her braid sway along with her movement, I couldn’t help smiling myself.

I wonder if she chose to braid her hair because of the outfit. Her flower-shaped hair ornament looks perfect on her.

“I also have this!” she said. I realized then that Nanami-san was holding something in her hand. It was a pair of glasses. *Did she have them in her purse all along?*

The glasses had such thin silver frames on them that for a moment I thought they didn’t have any frames at all. They looked similar to the pair she’d worn while tutoring me, but this time, the lenses were circular. It was the first time I’d seen these glasses, which made me wonder how many pairs Nanami-san owned.

She put the glasses on slowly and then turned to me with her head tilted. “What do you think?”

“You look perfect.”

She really did look perfect. I honestly didn’t think I had a thing for glasses, but these were very, very good indeed. I never knew that glasses and kimono made such a great pairing. I resolved to have her let me take a picture of her later.

For a while, she stood there twirling, showing me all three-hundred-and-sixty degrees of her outfit. Nanami-san looked so beautiful, and it seemed even people around us were watching her.

When I extended my hand toward her cautiously, she stopped and took my hand, smiling. Perhaps because of our outfits, I felt nervous, as though I were serving as an escort for a young lady from a wealthy

family. That was how beautiful she looked.

It seemed I wasn't the only one who thought that. When I was walking through the town with her a short while later, I noticed people doing double takes. Men, especially, seemed to be turning around to look at her. Yup, they were definitely looking at Nanami-san. I even saw a guy walking with his girlfriend turn around to stare. His girlfriend stopped to yell at him.

Seeing that, I told myself to be careful not to look at other girls while I was with Nanami-san, but it wasn't like I even had to. Seeing her talking so happily as she trotted along next to me, I knew that there was no way I would look at anyone else. In fact, I could swear on my life that that would never happen.

We were walking together hand in hand. That alone made the view and the world appear magnificent to me. As we proceeded, though, I heard voices coming from around us. They were both complimenting Nanami-san and questioning me. The questions weren't terribly blatant, of course, but people definitely saw Nanami-san and then looked at me and said, "Huh?" or muttered something along those lines. I'd seen scenes like that in manga before, but I never knew they actually happened—not that it was entirely surprising.

It was hard to explain, though. Typically, my head would be filled with negative and self-deprecating thoughts, or I would think that Nanami-san and I didn't match, or I would question whether I was good enough for her. This time, however, no such thought entered my mind. In fact, I was happy about all the praise that people were directing toward Nanami-san. I had to hold my head high and tell myself that I, the guy who had the privilege of standing next to her, couldn't do anything to embarrass us. *Don't show your pathetic side. Stand tall*, I thought.

Even though it was just my imagination, I felt like I could do anything.

"What's on your mind, Yoshin?"

"Hm? Oh, I was just thinking how happy I am to get to walk with you and enjoy the view."

"Ah, I see. I thought you were just taken with how cute I looked. You thought the view was more beautiful, huh?"

"What are you talking about? Of course you're beautiful, Nanami-san. Everyone around us is looking at you."

My comment took Nanami-san by surprise. She slapped me on the back several times, her face glowing red. It actually kind of hurt. If she was going to turn so red, why had she tried teasing me in the first place? I guess the answer went without saying. I'd come to understand that much.

"Seriously, isn't it you they're looking at?" she protested.

“That’s unlikely. I’m pretty sure they’re looking at you.”

Hearing the certainty in my voice, Nanami-san hid her scarlet face. Her gesture only made her look more adorable. It would be a problem, however, if Nanami-san wasn’t able to enjoy herself because she was aware she was being watched. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything.

Wondering if there was something I could do, I looked ahead of us and saw the perfect solution. It would allow us to hide from the curious looks and even matched our current outfits.

“Nanami-san, what do you say we ride that?”

When I pointed to the vehicle in question, Nanami-san peeked out from behind her hands. When she saw what I was pointing at, she tilted her head in wonder. “That’s a rickshaw. I didn’t know they had stuff like that here.”

Yup, a rickshaw. To be honest, I’d forgotten its name at first. I was impressed that Nanami-san was able to name it so naturally. To the side of the rickshaw stood a tough-looking young man with more muscles than I had, wearing a traditional livery coat. When he noticed me looking at him, he smiled at us warmly.

“You two, there! Would you like to take a ride? It’ll make for a great memory, and it’s perfect for couples!”

It seemed the man hadn’t heard our conversation, which made us both look at each other, amused. He looked at us quizzically.

“That would be great. Thank you,” I said.

“My pleasure. Is there anywhere specific you’d like to visit?”

Neither Nanami-san nor I was familiar with the area. Given that we’d chosen a rickshaw in order to avoid unnecessary attention, we decided to leave the route up to him.

The seat in the rickshaw was a lot more comfortable than I’d expected. I felt like Nanami-san was sitting a lot closer to me than when we were in the car the day before. I guess that’s because she actually was.

“All right, then—we’re off!”

With the young man’s call, the rickshaw shifted dramatically. Our line of sight rose, and suddenly we saw the view before us much differently than before. I wondered if this was how tall people—like Shibetsu-senpai, maybe—saw the world.

Nanami-san gave out a little yelp and grabbed hold of my hand. I squeezed it tightly to reassure her. As if feeling relieved, she looked at me once and then turned her gaze back toward the view.

It was a strange experience—moving forward with the wind in my hair even though I wasn’t moving my body. The feeling was similar to riding a bike but still somehow different. I felt like I was suspended in midair, but I was firmly affixed to my seat. The ride wasn’t unlike

being in a car, but maybe riding a rollercoaster was more similar.

The view, seen from a whole new perspective, flowed slowly past me. The warmth of the sun felt just right, and the breeze was gentle and pleasant. Although Nanami-san gave several squeals of nervousness toward the beginning, she began to enjoy the view more fully once she became accustomed to the ride. She even started turning to me and chatting excitedly.

The young man seemed to be taking roads with fewer people, because there was little noise coming from our surroundings. From the top of the hill, we saw the ocean with a ship passing by. *I want to travel on a ship one day. Where is it going?* I wondered.

While moving, the young man pulling the rickshaw explained the history and cultural significance behind several of the buildings we passed. Nanami-san and I never ceased to lose interest in the cityscape with its rich history, the buildings with their mix of Japanese and Western styles, and the stories we didn't get to hear at school. *This must be what it means to travel*, I thought.

The young man stopped the rickshaw from time to time and took photos of us in front of various scenic backdrops. Perhaps it was a part of the service, but it really was making for great memories. In the photos, we looked like we'd traveled back in time—though I didn't know much about history, so maybe I just felt like we had.

I suddenly regretted having declined my parents' invitation every time they'd asked me to come along. I just never thought a homebody like me would enjoy being on a trip this much. What was done was done, though; there was no use fretting over it now. From now on, I would just have to accept their offers.

Beside me, Nanami-san was enjoying the view and scrolling through the pictures we'd taken. She seemed to be really enjoying herself, as she snuggled up close and was humming a little.

"Doesn't wearing a kimono and riding a rickshaw make it seem like I'm the young lady of some noble family or something?"

"A noble lady, huh? Well then, my lady, where shall we head once we complete our rickshaw ride?"

"It doesn't matter where!"

"Isn't that totally out of character?" I said, laughing.

Even I knew that we were messing around. Our delightful time on the rickshaw, though, had to come to an end. After having taken several detours, the rickshaw circled around the area and returned to where we'd first stepped into it. It seemed the young man had given us quite a lot of extra time, as he'd shown us lots of interesting places. They were definitely worth revisiting later.

I'd just stepped out of the rickshaw when I was struck by an impulse to be a bit playful.

“Your hand, please, my lady,” I said.

Nanami-san opened her eyes wide in surprise, but she immediately smiled and took my hand. Her smile made her really seem like the young daughter from a noble family, and I felt my heart skip a beat. I’d expected her to giggle and be more excited, so I felt like I’d been had.

“Thank you,” she said.

I could have imagined it, but even her voice sounded different. It had a certain kind of luster but was nonetheless calming and pleasant. I blushed when I heard it.

After descending from the rickshaw with her hand in mine, Nanami-san looked up at me from over the frame of her glasses and stuck out her tongue. “Did your heart get all fluttery?”

I had to laugh at both her expression and question. Usually she was the one pulling something and then I would respond, but this time, it was quite the opposite.

As we thanked the young man and were about to leave, he concluded our trip with a final act of great service. “Please use this if you have a chance,” he said, handing something to us. It was a coupon to a local restaurant. Accepting it with gratitude, we thanked him one more time and started off toward our next destination. The young man bowed to us as we left.

As we walked away, Nanami-san and I chatted about what a kind person he was. When we glanced back, we were surprised to see that he was still bowing to us. He continued to do so until we turned a corner and could no longer see him. He seemed much older than us, but I felt a great deal of respect for how seriously he took his work. That must have been what it meant to be a professional at something.

“That was amazing, wasn’t it? I thought the same when they were dressing me in the kimono earlier, but that really was the work of a professional.”

Nanami-san seemed just as impressed as I was. Her dream was to be a teacher, so maybe she felt a particular resonance when she met adults like that. On the other hand, how did I feel?

I looked at Nanami-san and squinted. She suddenly seemed so dazzling when I knew about how she had a dream she wanted to accomplish for her future and that she was working steadily toward it. I wondered if I would be able to find a dream like that for myself.

“I was wondering, do you have anything you want to do or be when you’re older, Yoshin? I don’t think I’ve ever asked.”

“Um, to be honest, I don’t. I always thought I’d be fine if I could live a normal life while getting to continue playing games,” I said.

My response was very uninspired, really. I worried that Nanami-san might be disappointed by the fact that I, unlike her, didn’t have

any plans for the future. She just mumbled, “I see,” and grew silent.

As I was regretting not having given a more thought-out answer, Nanami-san gave my hand a squeeze. Given that she didn’t do that often, I looked at her questioningly.

“In that case...” Nanami-san said, hesitating for a moment. This, too, was rare coming from her. I waited anxiously to hear what she said next. A brief silence followed between us.

We continued walking in silence for some time. It was almost time to give back our rental costumes. I wondered if we should return to the store and pick out a new set of costumes. I felt a bit disappointed that I’d no longer be able to see Nanami-san in her hakama.

As I continued walking in a daze, Nanami-san opened her mouth to break the silence. “I hope we can discover your dreams for the future together.”

She spoke softly as she smiled shyly at me. Discovering them together, huh? It’s be amazing if we could do that.

“You’re right. That’d be awesome.”

When I smiled back at her, she squeezed my hand tighter and happily swung it around. Even though I didn’t have any definite dreams for the future yet, I felt like I had discovered one.

To be with Nanami-san.

That was the one dream I had that I absolutely wanted to come true. Others might say that a dream like that was small and pointless, but I didn’t care—because it was the first real dream I’d ever had. It wasn’t like I was going to share it with anyone. Me alone knowing was enough.

In my heart, where no one else could hear, I made up my mind to make that dream come true.



“I can’t sleep,” I muttered to myself as I lay alone in bed.

I’d slept so soundly the night before, but tonight I was wide awake despite my heavy eyelids. *Is it because of the bed next to mine?* I wondered, glancing over at the other bed.

There, Nanami-san and Saya-chan were sleeping together like the two close sisters that they were. Maybe the unbelievable fact that the two girls were sleeping next to me was what was keeping me awake. Just how many times was I going to sleep in the same room as Nanami-san? Not that I wasn’t happy about it, but still.

I smiled at the two sisters as they slept soundly under one set of covers. Of course, there was a reason for all this—there’s a reason for everything—but I most certainly hadn’t dragged them in here or anything like that.

The reason was simple: right about now, the adults in the next

room were most likely in the middle of a booze fest. It was probably still ongoing, but since I couldn't hear anything, I couldn't be sure.

Given the incident the other day at Nanami-san's house, I was a bit nervous about being in a room with alcohol. That was why the three of us had evacuated to the bedroom. We had tried to compete against the adults by partying it up with juice and snacks, but Saya-chan and Nanami-san had both fallen asleep fairly early in the evening.

Nanami-san was probably sapped of energy after walking around all day. Saya-chan's batteries were probably just as dead, since she and my mom seemed to have had a blast together. The fact that both sisters had taken a bath in the hot springs had probably only added to their sleepiness.

Anyway, that was how I'd ended up awake all by myself.

What should I do? Should I play around on my phone? Come to think of it, I haven't logged into my game at all today. Let's fire it up.

Canyon: Is anyone else here?

The responses to my message in the chat room were immediate. Baron-san and Peach-san were both still up. They were always there for me, those two—I appreciated that. I also wondered when they actually managed to sleep.

Baron: Yo! What's up, Canyon-kun? Enjoying your trip?

Peach: I'm here, but aren't you on your trip right now? Seriously, you should be making memories with your girlfriend.

Baron: She's right. You can play games later. The event's wound down a bit now. Come on, Canyon-san. You're a high schooler! The night is young for you! When I used to go on trips, I'd stay up all night.

Not only were Baron-san and Peach-san still awake, but they immediately had started in on me. Wow, things had gotten real lively, real fast. Thank god for that.

Canyon: Well, no. Actually, my girlfriend's asleep right next to me.

The moment I posted my message, what had been a lively chat room came to a complete standstill. Wondering what was up, I sent a follow-up message, but still there was no response.

It wasn't until several moments later that I finally got a reply.

Baron: Canyon-kun, did you finally...?

Peach: Huh? N-Next to you, as in... Do you really mean that?

What's with their reactions? I thought at first, but when I reread my own message, I realized my mistake. It was impossible *not* to interpret my message that way. It seemed my brain wasn't functioning as well as I thought it was. Maybe I was tired too, but if that were the case, why couldn't I fall asleep?

Canyon: Let me rephrase! She's sleeping in the bed next to mine. We are NOT sleeping together!

Baron: Oh, I see. That's kind of boring.

Peach: Jeez. I feel like I got all worked up over nothing.

Baron-san's comment was somewhat harsh. I wondered what would happen if I were to tell them that she and I had slept in the same bed the night before—though that truly was due to force majeure. No matter, though, since I wasn't going to tell them. I went ahead and continued typing.

There wasn't anything specific I wanted to ask them; I just thought that if I talked with the two of them, I might be able to fall asleep at some point. Instead, I seemed to be feeling more and more awake.

Baron: So, how are you enjoying your trip? Man, I didn't go on a trip with my girl's family until after we were married. Kids these days sure move fast.

Peach: Baron-san, Canyon-san's definitely out of the ordinary. This would never happen with an ordinary high school student.

Canyon: Yeah, I know that better than anyone. Actually, my parents were the ones who got the idea. They said it was unfair that I stayed over at my girlfriend's place that time. Heck, I was surprised they even planned this trip.

Baron: Your parents, huh? I see. Then I kind of understand how they feel.

Did Baron-san also think it was unfair? I wanted him to cut me

some slack, but he really did seem like he was beginning to understand, or like he'd been convinced by something. He continued without waiting for my reaction.

Baron: Your parents must have felt really happy to see their son growing into himself. Since you were in middle school, you've always put gaming before everything else, right? And now, all of a sudden, you're going out on dates and staying over at a girl's house. You've been showing way more involvement with other people.

Canyon: Well, I guess that's true. But when I'm playing games, I get to hang out with you and everyone else.

Baron: It's a matter of perspective. Online relationships are difficult to judge from an outsider's point of view.

He had a point. Even if I told my parents that I had friends online, they would probably have trouble understanding. Having friends like that also didn't change the fact that I was at home all the time.

Baron: I don't have kids yet, but I can imagine myself feeling happy seeing my kids grow like that—not that I'm criticizing who you were in the past, or anything.

Baron-san really was both considerate and mature. Peach-san seemed just as struck by what he'd said, as she responded in kind.

Change, huh? I did feel like there were parts of me that had changed, but would my parents really be happy about something like that? I supposed they had seemed happy when I'd introduced Nanami-san to them as my girlfriend, but maybe that was a different kind of happy.

I didn't feel like there was anything wrong with my past self. My time up till now had been fun in its own way. But then, I didn't dislike my present self either. Still, if my parents were happy as a result, then I supposed my change was for the better.

I never thought I'd be talking with Baron-san and Peach-san about something like this. *Maybe I really should think about spending more time with my parents, but then...maybe it's a little too late. I mean, it's kind of embarrassing. How should I go about doing that, anyway?*

Canyon: I can't seem to get my head straight. Maybe

I'll go hit up the hot springs again.

Baron: Oh, that sounds great. Maybe if you get warmed up in the bath, you'll feel more sleepy too.

Peach: Hot springs... How nice. I want to go too. I'm so jealous!

For a middle schooler, Peach-san sure had mature taste. Now that I'd had a chance to talk with her and Baron-san, I thought going to the hot springs and having a change of pace really was a good idea. I was pretty sure I'd seen a vending machine that sold ice cream too. *Ice cream after a bath... Yeah, I really should go and try this out.*

Canyon: All righty then. I'll be heading off now.

Once I'd typed in my last reply, the two of them sent me off. Now I just needed to get ready. *If I'm gonna make the most of this, I should take a yukata. I should be careful too, since Nanami-san and Saya-chan are still sleeping.*

After completing my preparations with utmost care, I began to leave the room very slowly...but at that moment, someone tugged on my shirt. Although I had already taken a step forward, I stopped in my tracks at the meek but definite pull. I was startled to have someone pull me back all of a sudden, but when I turned around...

"Yoshin, where are you sneaking off to?"

I saw Nanami-san, of course.

She'd looked up at me as she whispered, smiling like a child who'd successfully pulled off a prank. When I looked more closely, I saw what she had in her hands: the very same items I had in mine, that were meant for taking a bath. When had she managed to retrieve them? I moved closer to her and, careful not to wake Saya-chan, whispered, "Were you awake?"

"I was only dozing. Jeez, you're so mean! I was getting my stuff together so that I could go to the hot springs with you. You should've said something."

"No, I totally thought you were asleep."

Nanami-san pouted, protesting my solo escape. We'd all taken a bath together after we'd arrived at the hotel, but after that, each of us had enjoyed our time in the hot springs on our own. Nanami-san had taken a bath with Saya-chan and my mom, while I'd gone to the hot springs alone, so the only times I'd seen Nanami-san wearing the hotel's yukata were last night and this morning. As you might expect, I hadn't been able to have a good look yet.

When I glanced over at her, I saw that she was carrying the yukata among her other items. Like me, she was all set to go, so I had

no reason to refuse her company. It would probably be more fun to go together anyway—it would be our first time going to the hot springs as just the two of us.

“Shall we go then?” I asked her.

“Yeah. This is gonna be so fun!”

“Wait, it’s not a mixed bath, is it?”

“It’ll be fine. If you’re all in separate baths in the open air at the same time, it ends up being a mixed bath anyway!”

Where’d she hear something like that? Besides, didn’t that seem more like something a guy would say? How could they just “end up” being a mixed bath? I supposed the men’s and women’s baths were right next to each other, but they were still separated by a wall.

Oh, now that she’s said it, she’s getting all embarrassed. If she’s gonna go all red like that, she shouldn’t say anything. She probably just said it in the heat of the moment.

In any case, Nanami-san and I decided to head to the hot springs together. Walking down a deserted hallway with no one but the two of us, I was made to remember the night we’d first arrived at the hotel. Unlike that last time, though, we were now much more relaxed. The day before, I’d been super nervous, probably because the two of us had been heading up to our room together. This time, we were headed to the hot springs, but of course we’d be entering separately.

As we were walking, we came across the entrance to the family bath. It was situated slightly closer than the separate baths for men and women. Because of Nanami-san’s earlier comment about mixed baths, I couldn’t help being needlessly conscious of it. Nanami-san herself was looking down at her feet, red-faced. She seemed to be thinking about it too.

“S-So, uh, I’ll see you later, yeah?” she said to me.

“Yeah, I’ll catch you when we’re done. If I come out first, I’ll wait for you.”

We went our separate ways in front of the changing rooms, and I made my way into the men’s bath. There were no cliché turns of events, like discovering the bath was actually mixed, entering the wrong changing room, or having the signs reversed and accidentally ending up in the women’s bath. Of course not.

When I stepped into the bath area, I noticed there was barely anyone there. It was rather late in the evening, so there were only a few people bathing. It almost seemed like I’d managed to rent out the whole place to myself. I wondered if the same could be said for Nanami-san’s side.

As I sat there soaking in the indoor tub, I felt my mind grow clearer. All the small things in life seemed to matter less and less the longer I sat there. I was so relaxed, in fact, that I could have fallen

asleep like that. Just as I was thinking as much, my eyes fell upon a glass door—it was the door that led out to the open-air bath.

“Bathing outside, huh?”

The space beyond the glass door looked completely dark; I couldn’t see any light coming in. *Maybe I should check it out*, I thought. Nanami-san had mentioned outdoor bathing earlier, so perhaps I was more aware of it because of her. Plus I was curious what an open-air bath was like at night.

When I stepped outside, the evening wind swept gently over my body, making me shiver. The temperature itself wasn’t terribly low, but I couldn’t help feeling this way after getting so cozy in the indoor bath.

There were only a few light fixtures outside, which seemed dangerous, since I couldn’t really see my feet. Feeling the chill, though, I skittered over to the water and hopped in. My entire body quivered from the change in temperature, and I scowled at the sudden hotness of the bathwater. Perhaps the temperature of the bath was higher because it was outside.

As I wondered as much, I looked out from the open-air bath. Just as my mom had said, the view was absolutely superb.

From below, lights from buildings and lamps situated along the mountain paths jumped into view. *Are those moving lights all cars?* I wondered. *Maybe the slower ones are ships.* When I looked more closely, I noticed there were moving lights everywhere; they almost looked like shooting stars. I felt like I was somehow looking down at a starlit sky.

The open-air bath was empty aside from me, so I really did have the place all to myself, which made the view seem all the more like a luxury. I regretted not having gone out there the day before.

This view really is beautiful, I thought. *I wonder if Nanami-san’s seeing the same thing?* As I sat there in a world of my own, I thought I heard her voice. *Wow, I’ve gotten to the point where I’m hearing things...*

No, wait. I’m not imagining it. I can actually hear Nanami-san humming. Apparently the open-air bath was close to the women’s bath after all. *I wonder if it’s so we can enjoy the same view.*

I felt moved by the fact that I was able to share the view with Nanami-san. As I sat there soaking, listening to her humming, I began to daydream that I was taking a bath together with Nanami-san herself. Perhaps she was alone too.

Although I could hear her voice, that didn’t mean she was talking directly to me. Still, I felt like I was doing something inappropriate, and I couldn’t help holding my breath. My heart was beating wildly, and I prayed that it would calm down as I sank lower and lower into the tub.

I stayed there for quite some time, until I could no longer hear Nanami-san's voice. With her beautiful song and the beautiful night view, I was in a fantastic mood. Perhaps if I were an adult, I could laze around with a drink, like on a little tray or something—not that I knew if people actually did that sort of thing.

Once Nanami-san's humming had faded into the distance, I got up. When I stood up, though, I felt dizzy and my entire body swayed. *Whoa. I think the heat really got to me.*

My heart was thumping, and I had this sensation that blood was circulating at max speed throughout my body. Also, my footsteps were unsteady. *This is definitely not good.*

It seemed I'd been in the water too long. I waited for a few minutes and then made my way out of the bath. Luckily, I managed to not keel over, but I took my time to cool down as I clumsily put on my yukata.

Soon after, I walked out of the changing room and looked around, but Nanami-san was nowhere to be seen. *Is she still in the bath?* I wondered. The rest area outside the changing rooms was spacious, and you could also look out at the view from the windows along the walls. I hoped that Nanami-san was dealing with the temperatures better than I was. I started to feel kind of worried, but I had no way of checking on her. *Maybe I should just wait until my body settles down a bit more. I should probably get myself a drink.*

When I sat down in one of the available chairs to consider my beverage options, I felt something cold press up against my neck.

“Wah!”

Startled, I spun around in my seat to find Nanami-san standing there, two milk bottles in her hand. Even as I remained frozen with shock written all over my face, Nanami-san raised the bottles and made a little peace sign with her two fingers.

“Yay, gotcha! It's so rare to hear you scream. How cute!” she said, beaming like an innocent child. I was about to protest, but then I got a better look at her—and I became speechless.

Nanami-san was standing there dressed in a yukata.



She must have thought it strange that I turned around but didn't say anything. With a puzzled expression on her face, she tilted her whole body along with her head. When she did so, the part of the yukata that overlapped across her chest shifted slightly. Her skin, slightly flushed from the bath, became visible, and I blushed when I saw it.

A yukata-clad Nanami-san had a charm different from what she'd displayed during the daytime in her hakama. She wasn't showing much skin, but I still felt my heart beating faster. Even the word "sexy" wasn't enough to describe her.

She was wearing the same hotel-issued yukata as I was, but it looked like an entirely different outfit on her. Her hair was tied up, and even from the front, I saw that her neck was completely exposed. Of course there were other times when her hairstyles made her neck visible, but this time, it looked different—and I felt way more nervous because of it. A strand of hair had fallen at the nape of her neck. Maybe that's what was making her exude an indescribable sensuality. I had an irresistible urge to see her from behind.

I never thought I had a thing for bare necks either. All sorts of doors were opening for me today that I hadn't even known existed.

"What's wrong? You're spacing out," she said.

"Oh, sorry. I was just stunned by how beautiful you look in your yukata."

In the end, I'd blurted out the first thing that had popped into my head. Both Nanami-san and I flushed in unison. I was pretty sure this heat wasn't anything to do with the hot springs.

Narrowing her eyes, Nanami-san brought her face closer to mine and glared at me. Her being so close to me made my heart skip another beat.

"Jeez! Why do you keep saying things like that?! You saw me wearing one yesterday too, remember?!"

"No, no, no. Yesterday, everyone else was there too, so I didn't get to look so closely. That's why I couldn't help—"

"Never mind!" she shouted. "Let's just drink our milk! Which one do you want? There's fruit or coffee flavor."

"Oh, uh, coffee, please."

Once I'd accepted the milk from her, she plopped down on the chair next to me. We happened to be sitting facing the wall, so we ended up looking out at the view while we were sitting side by side.

I didn't even bother drinking my milk—I was too transfixed by Nanami-san. She opened the lid of her milk bottle and brought the rim slowly to her lips. Her pink lips touched the transparent glass and softly morphed as they pressed against it. Tilting back the bottle, she

sipped the slightly tinted liquid, her throat making light gulping sounds.

Sighing, Nanami-san took the bottle from her lips. She then licked them seductively, cleaning off the white tinge of milk. I sat there, completely transfixed, gripping my own milk bottle tightly in my hand.

“Do you want a sip?” Nanami-san asked hesitantly.

She must have interpreted my gaze as an expression of my desire for her fruit-flavored milk. She tilted her bottle and smiled at me. I felt embarrassed, thinking I must have come across as childish. Nanami-san nonetheless handed the bottle to me without saying a word, and I accepted it from her.

When I offered her my bottle of coffee milk instead, she laughed and remarked on how I hadn’t had any of it yet. She lifted it up against the light filtering in from outside. Her face, as I looked at it from the side, was beautiful. Just to cool myself down, I took a sip of the fruit milk she’d given me. A sweet, cool, and familiar taste spread throughout my mouth.

Like her, I exhaled as I took the bottle from my lips. I noticed then that Nanami-san was staring at me intently. Realizing she’d been watching me, I turned to meet her gaze, at which point Nanami-san grinned and said, delightedly, “An indirect kiss, huh? Is that what you were after? Yoshin, you’re such a pervert.”

Huh? Oh... I only realized it when she pointed it out. I mean, no, that hadn’t been what I was after, but with that being the end result, I started to panic. Even though I had finally managed to calm my nerves, I started sweating again. *Maybe I should go take another bath.*

“I’m gonna try this one too,” she said, indicating the coffee milk in her hand.

“Oh, sure. Go ahead.”

I felt like I was consistently falling one step behind today. Despite my complete lack of composure, Nanami-san opened the lid to the coffee milk, took a sip, and then handed the bottle back to me. There was no need to reiterate, but...

“Now we’ve both had our indirect kisses, huh?” she said with a laugh.

How was I supposed to respond to this? I had to think. Express my agreement, drink in silence, protest, intentionally put my lips where Nanami-san had put her lips...? No, that last one was out. Actually, wait. Maybe that was the correct response for an adolescent. Or was it? *No way. Calm down, Yoshin. After all, where did Nanami-san put her lips?*

Flustered, I decided to drink and leave the rest to fate. A different taste—a sweetness combined with a slight bitterness—spread

throughout my mouth this time.

Downing half the drink at once, I slammed the bottle down onto a nearby desk in a slightly exaggerated fashion. When I glanced beside me, Nanami-san was right there next to me. She, too, drank her milk, then set the bottle down gently.

Smiling happily, she scooted over to sit slightly closer to me. The lighting around us wasn't terribly bright, perhaps so that people could better enjoy the view. In fact, there still seemed to be a number of couples and families around, all of them enjoying the view and chatting, but it didn't feel like any of them were watching us.

"Nanami-san," I said, "are you a little more excited than usual, by any chance?"

"Of course I am. I might even be more excited than I was earlier. More excited than I've ever been, in fact."

As we gazed out of the window together, Nanami-san shuffled a little closer.

I'd thought about this earlier too, but I felt like I was being made to go with the flow of things a lot during this trip. In fact, maybe I was being way too passive. Seeing Nanami-san's behavior, I now felt that even more strongly.

I'd been dragged along on this trip of my mom's invention, and I'd let the adults take care of getting us there. The only time I'd suggested something myself was when we'd rented the costumes earlier. *Nanami-san's really taking charge of things here*, I thought. *Maybe I should do something myself.*

For starters, I told myself to try holding her hand.

I was being a bit of a one-trick pony, but that was all I was capable of doing at this point. And so, I went ahead and squeezed her hand, taking advantage of the fact that she was now sitting so close to me. At first, Nanami-san jumped slightly, startled, but then she happily put her head on my shoulder.

"The bath felt really nice, huh?" she said.

Nanami-san's head was so close to mine, the smell of her shampoo was tickling my nose. To tell the truth, I'd known for a while that something smelled good—I just hadn't realized that it was her. Her scent was much different from usual, so it had taken me a while to realize it.

"You smell a little different from usual, Nanami-san. It's really nice."

The moment the words escaped my lips, I had to ask myself, *Is this sexual harassment? Shoot, that can't be good.* I felt my face drain of color, and despite my long soak in the hot springs, my body suddenly felt cold all over.

Nanami-san's eyes widened. She seemed just as surprised as I was.

I was convinced I'd finally done it, but her expression immediately softened.

"Maybe it's because I used the hotel shampoo," she said. "This has to be the first time you've commented on something like that."

"Sorry," I murmured.

"No, you don't have to apologize! It's totally fine. Besides, we smell the same."

Nanami-san brought her face closer to me and inhaled slowly. Shocked by the sudden closeness, I found myself scooting away from her. She looked sad for a moment, but she seemed to understand. Showing off a toothy grin, she pounced on me.

This time, I was more than surprised. My whole body froze in shock.

"Don't try to run away!" she exclaimed.

Running wasn't exactly an option, so I chose to face her attack head-on. No, that didn't mean I was going to counterattack; I just decided to open my arms wide and let her leap into them.

Now Nanami-san was the one to be surprised, because she froze right before she and I were about to make contact. We both ended up frozen in strange postures, and because we were just inches away from one another, neither one of us could move. Finally, though, we burst out laughing.

"Wait, why did you stop?" I asked, grinning. "I thought you were coming, so I was waiting for you."

"I stopped *because* you were waiting for me!" she replied. "If you hold your arms out like that, we're gonna end up hugging each other!"

"But you started it."

"Girls are complicated, okay?!"

That's what she'd said, but in actuality, I was pretty certain this was one of those classic moments of embarrassment that come from being the one to initiate something. It's not like I'd expected it or anything; it had just ended up turning out that way. She wasn't the only one to get embarrassed about embracing in public. Holding hands was the best I could do.

Pouting, Nanami-san straightened her posture, then moved to take a sip of her milk. I, too, drank my remaining milk, as I watched her illuminated by the lights.

When we had both finished drinking, I turned to her. "Sorry for getting you caught up in my mom's plans, Nanami-san. I got kind of swept away too."

"Don't apologize. I don't mind, and we can even call this a date where we get to go somewhere we ordinarily wouldn't get to go. It's fun to travel with everyone else too, isn't it?"

"I'm glad to hear you say that. I know this sounds like an excuse,

but I'm pretty sure that it's the first time since elementary school that I've been on a trip like this. I guess I don't really know what to do."

"Elementary school..." she repeated slowly.

I'd only realized it when Baron-san had pointed it out, but I was pretty sure that was the case. Of course, my parents and I had gone out together from time to time, but the trips were never anything major. That was why I was so worried I was messing things up for her, even if it wasn't the case.

To be honest, I really didn't remember much from my elementary school days. That was why I couldn't say for sure when we'd last taken a trip as a family. That wasn't the main issue now, though.

Nanami-san's expression had clouded when I'd mentioned elementary school. She'd said she didn't mind being dragged out here, but there was still something bothering her.

What Nanami-san said next, however, caught me off guard.

"I told you that, in the car, I heard stories about you from when you were in elementary school, right?" she said.

The car? Was she talking about when she was riding in the car with my mom? Nanami-san had said that my mom had told her a story or two, but I hadn't asked her about any specifics. I guess I'd just been too scared to ask what my mom had said.

I waited for her to continue. I didn't interject. The look she was giving me was completely serious, making me worry about what she had to say. I felt that if I said something then, Nanami-san wouldn't tell me what was on her mind.

"I heard from Shinobu-san that you used to play outside a lot back then. She also said that, one day, all of a sudden, you stopped playing with the other kids."

"Ah, I see."

Even I was surprised by how cold my voice had sounded. I only realized, though, when I saw the expression on Nanami-san's face. She seemed shocked—so shocked that she looked like she was about to cry. I felt ashamed that I'd made her make such a face after she'd been laughing just moments before.

But why had I spoken like that in the first place? I didn't know. I didn't know, but somehow I felt incredibly uncomfortable that Nanami-san had found that out about me.

It wasn't that I felt that my mom had said something uncalled-for or that I was embarrassed. It was that I felt uncomfortable about something. I just didn't know what that something was. And, because of that, I'd subconsciously spoken to her coldly.

"Sorry," I muttered.

"Oh, don't apologize. I was the one who heard about it from Shinobu-san. But that's not what I wanted to say. I wanted to tell you

that your mom thanked me when she told me that story. She told me that you've changed since you started going out with me and that you've become more like your old self."

"My old self?"

"Yeah. To me, though, you haven't changed at all. You were always like that from the beginning. I don't really know how to say this, but I just felt like I shouldn't really be thanked for it."

I hadn't realized my mom had said something like that to her. Strangely enough, it seemed to tie in with what Baron-san had said earlier. Baron-san wasn't watching us from somewhere, was he? As it turned out, his true identity had been staring me in the face all along—Yeah, as if the plot twists would ever get *that* crazy.

"I'm sorry that I can't explain it well," Nanami-san said, forcing a smile. "It's just that you mentioned not taking a trip since elementary school, so I wanted to tell you not to worry about anything. I also wanted to say sorry for hearing stories about you without your permission."

Despite that smile, Nanami-san still looked really sad about something. The sight alone squeezed all the air from my chest.

Of course she didn't have to worry about anything like that. I'd heard stories about Nanami-san from when *she* was in elementary school, so if anything, we were even. When I told her that, her expression changed into one resembling relief.

Still, what *had* I been like when I was younger?

I'd completely forgotten about what I was like in elementary school. It was almost like hearing about someone else. Was what she was saying true? I really didn't remember anything about it, so I probably wasn't going to suddenly recall at the drop of a hat. Had something happened to me? I didn't think so.

I had a feeling the reason was something ordinary, like my interests shifting toward gaming. If a specific reason wasn't lodged in my memory, then my "change" was probably down to some boring reason like that.

It was no use overthinking it, so I decided to let it drop.

I understood now, though, why Nanami-san had seemed so down when she'd stepped out of the car. I supposed it hadn't been my imagination, after all. If someone thanked you for helping someone because of a dare, it would probably make you feel a bit depressed too.

I remembered feeling a bit sad and confused when Nanami-san's parents had thanked me. At that time, there'd been a lot going on, so I really couldn't pay attention to the feeling, but...I, too, was deceiving people.

That was why I wanted to tell Nanami-san that she had nothing to

worry about, but I couldn't tell her that now. If I did, I would also have to tell her that I knew about the dare. I couldn't tell her that—not quite yet—so instead, I changed the subject slightly.

“Don't you think you've changed quite a bit too? I mean, I would never believe you had so much trouble with guys before, given how...”

“How what...?” she repeated.

“How easy you are,” I concluded.

“Easy?!”

Pretending to have said something I hadn't meant to, I covered my mouth with my hand. Did I look natural enough? Nanami-san's face shifted immediately, from a gloomy expression to one of embarrassment.

“Easy... Hatsumi and Ayumi said the same thing to me. Is it true? Am I really easy?” Nanami-san asked herself as she covered her cheeks with both hands. I hadn't expected her two best friends to have said the same thing to her. That was the first I'd heard of it. I had no choice but to follow up and explain myself.

“I guess 'easy' isn't quite what I mean. I just mean that when I think about the way you act toward me, I can't really believe you ever had any issues with guys. That's why I thought that you must've changed a lot too.”

“Well...I'm fine because it's you, I guess. I can't really explain it.”

“Ah, I see.”

With that, I ended up falling silent again. Was anyone capable of coming up with a thoughtful response when someone said something like that to them? I sure as hell wasn't. Hearing that she felt comfortable because it was me, I didn't know what to say.

“You're pretty forward with me too, you know?” she continued. “I've said it before, but I seriously thought that you were used to being with girls.”

“Oh, that.”

She'd said something of the sort to me back when we'd had our first date. At the time, we'd started talking about my clothes, so I'd never really given her a full explanation, but maybe it was finally time for me to introduce Nanami-san to Baron-san.

“Yeah, about that... I want to share something with you. There's a good reason for it,” I said.

“Is it an ex-girlfriend?” she asked, entirely serious.

“No, no, no! Don't worry; I don't have any ex-girlfriends.”

All things considered, I knew that having her meet Baron-san was a risk. If possible, though, I wanted to do my best to resolve the lump in my chest so that I'd be able to face Nanami-san with sincerity. I wanted to rid myself of my guilt so that I'd be able to stand next to her with a free conscience. That was why I was going to tell her that I

hadn't been tackling this relationship on my power alone.

"Well, maybe we're both similar in that sense. Neither one of us was really used to being close with someone of the opposite sex," I said, and with that harmless comment, I drew our conversation to a close. Our exchange just now had been a strange one, but it was one that we couldn't have had without being on this trip. That considered, maybe going along with my mom's plan wasn't so bad after all.

Nanami-san nodded, seemingly convinced, but she soon raised her index finger and brought it to her lips, as though she'd realized something. "But there is one difference between me and you," she remarked.

Difference? I was pretty sure there was more than one, so which did she have in mind? I tilted my head, struggling to guess. Nanami-san brought her index finger toward me and touched it to my lips. My heart skipped a beat at her gesture.

"You still use 'san' at the end of my name."

Nanami-san looked at me, her gaze full of expectation. *So that's what she wanted to say.* She straightened her posture as she continued looking at me, her eyes sparkling and filled with anticipation. The light filtering in from outside seemed to make her eyes shine even more beautifully. I even had the illusion that I could see stars twinkling in them. Did she want me to call her by her name? Just by her name, huh?

"Nanami."

I imagined myself saying it, but something, somehow, just didn't feel right. In fact, I felt a very strange sensation, like shivers running up my spine. Unable to identify the sensation, I attempted to say her name.

"Nanami...san."

But I couldn't do it. Something inside me was preventing me from doing it. I just couldn't bring myself to call her by her name. What was going on? I could say her name with honorifics, but my body just wouldn't let me say her name without the "san."

"Jeez, I'm telling you that you can just call me by my name!"

So I lied to her.

"Sorry, I guess I feel a little embarrassed about it."

Just a moment ago, I'd been thinking about how I wanted to be with Nanami-san, without feeling any kind of guilt. All of a sudden, though, that resolve had wavered. I couldn't wipe away the strange aversion I had to calling her by her name.

I continued to wonder about that unidentifiable feeling that I couldn't quite pinpoint. I'd tried to convince myself that I was just embarrassed. At that point, though, I had no way of knowing that, before long, I would learn the cause of my strange aversion.

Interlude: His Worrisome Reaction

Fresh out of the hot springs, I was now chatting with Yoshin, who was illuminated by the light coming in from the window. My eyes were completely glued to him.

We talked about all the things we'd enjoyed on our date that day. We talked about taking baths. We talked about what we'd do tomorrow. We talked about all kinds of trivial things, but each one felt important. When I was with him, I always had a great time—no matter when, no matter where we were together. That made me happier than anything else.

But this “date” of ours had really taken me by surprise. The fact that it was a lovely idea and the fact that it had surprised me were two completely different things. I mean, Shinobu-san, Yoshin's *mother*, had been the one to spring this trip on us. I would've thought that going on a trip with my boyfriend's parents would make me more nervous, but I didn't really feel that nervous at all.

I had felt kind of down on myself for a short while during the drive, but thanks to Yoshin, I'd managed to get over that feeling pretty quickly. It was, of course, my own fault. And once this trip was over, we would have one last week together. Time really does pass quickly.

Am I doing enough to ensure this week won't be our last? I wondered, looking at the side of Yoshin's face as I rested my chin on my hand. *What is he thinking about? Is he having fun with me, or does he actually want to go back to playing games instead?* Thought after thought crossed my mind.

Yoshin seemed to have caught me staring, because he got up from his chair.

“Are you thirsty, Nanami-san? I'm thinking of grabbing a drink. Would you like something?”

I'd only just finished my milk, but I was still kind of thirsty. He was always so considerate.

“Oh, an oolong tea would be great. If they don't have it, then any kind of tea would do.”

“Got it. Then maybe I'll get a soda.”

“Soda sounds good too. Do you wanna trade sips?”

Despite my flirty comment, I felt my cheeks grow warm as I remembered the indirect kiss from earlier. It seemed the same thought had popped into Yoshin's mind.

One of Yoshin's many charms was that he turned red when I said stuff like this. Of course, I had to suppress my own embarrassment at the same time. Sometimes, he would even say something back, but that, too, was fun in its own way. Ugh, I really was in deep.

Not too long ago, Hatsumi and Ayumi had asked me if I had slightly masochistic tendencies, but that wasn't it at all. I just really enjoyed our exchanges. I wasn't a masochist by any stretch of the imagination.

Oh, but having Yoshin be a little forceful with me... No, what am I even thinking?! My face felt hot, and I wondered if Yoshin had noticed, but he'd already left my side. Watching him from behind as he left to buy us our drinks, I remembered what he'd said earlier.

"Ah, I see."

It was just a simple remark, but the moment I'd heard him say it, I'd felt my heart stop dead. I'd said before the trip that seeing a different side of him was refreshing, but I wasn't able to feel that way this time. What he'd said and how he'd said it hadn't been refreshing at all.

I'd never heard his voice so cold, so dark, so low—like something that had come from the bottom of the ocean. I knew we'd only been going out for three weeks or so, but his words had lacked their usual warmth. He'd almost sounded kind of sad.

When I thought back on his comment, I felt a chill and a pain, as though someone had stuffed ice into my chest. That was the only way that I could explain how I felt.

Immediately after, though, Yoshin had apologized to me and returned to normal. Just now, too, I hadn't felt an ounce of the coldness that he'd exuded. If anything, I felt like I should have been the one to apologize to him. What I'd said to him must've touched a part of him that he didn't want anyone to touch.

I didn't know what that part of him was... Actually, I knew a little bit since we'd been talking about him in elementary school. I just felt so bad for hearing about it without asking for his permission, so I'd ended up telling him what I'd heard. I probably shouldn't have. It had been a slip of the tongue, but now I'd ended up with something to worry over.

"I wonder what happened," I said aloud.

Yoshin didn't talk about his past. It didn't seem like he didn't *want* to talk about it; if anything, it was more like he didn't even remember. The situation kind of reminded me of—

"Hyaa!" I shrieked.

The moment my mind had been about to grasp the thought, something cold had pressed up against my neck.

"Whoa, that scared me."

What was that?! When I spun around, I saw Yoshin standing behind me with two plastic bottles in his hands. He seemed just as shocked as I was. I'd been entirely focused on my thoughts, so my exclamation had come out all weird! Fixing my yukata, I looked up at Yoshin, glaring.

"Uh, I guess that's me getting back at you for earlier," he mumbled in apology, scratching his cheek sheepishly. He was right—I had done the same thing to him with the milk bottles. Ugh, talk about frustrating! All my thoughts had flown right out of my head. Yoshin, though, sat down next to me as he handed me my bottle of tea.

When he opened his own bottle, the cap made a light snapping sound. If I asked him for a sip now, it'd just be a rehash of what I'd done a little while ago.

As I watched him, my cheek resting on my fist, Yoshin placed his drink on a table nearby and stretched his arms above his head. His yukata fell open slightly, revealing his chest—my gaze got drawn to it immediately.

Huh? What am I doing? Surprised at myself, I panicked and quickly shifted my gaze back to his face. When our eyes met, he smiled. Feeling guilty about my inappropriate thoughts, I blushed from the shame. *Seriously, what am I doing?!*

Now I was starting to wonder if this was how the boys who looked at my chest felt. I could now understand the concept of the human gaze being drawn to whatever it was that moved. Yeah, I realized now that no one could help staring when someone was dressed this way.

I ought to be more thoughtful about stuff like this, I thought. *Maybe I should start covering up a little more at school. I can't go criticizing others when I'm acting like this. But I like the way my uniform is now—it looks so cute! Agh, what a mess. Oh, maybe I should ask what Yoshin prefers, and then decide.*

Thinking back to how I wore my own uniform, I made up my mind to ask Yoshin—and suddenly froze. A familiar group of people had caught my eye. Really, that I hadn't spotted them before then was a mystery. It must have been because I'd been looking only at Yoshin. I had no doubt he wasn't any more observant than I was, which was probably why neither one of us had noticed.

Yoshin seemed to detect something from the expression on my face, or maybe he became curious about what I was staring at. He turned around slowly, only to freeze like I had.

"Why are you guys here?" Yoshin asked in a low, quivering voice almost like a groan. Although his voice was low, it didn't have the same scary feel that it had earlier. At that, I smiled wryly with relief.

When the people in the group realized we'd noticed them, they waved to us and smiled. Their happy, ear-to-ear grins were in

complete contrast to our bitter ones. Yeah, there was probably no need for me to say who it was—it was our parents.

“Weren’t they drinking in their own room?” I wanted to ask. It wasn’t just our parents either—even Saya was there. *What’s that giant grin for, Saya? Weren’t you asleep?*

Could Saya have told our parents that Yoshin and I had snuck out? I heaved a deep sigh at the highly probable scenario.

Since the jig was up, my mom and everyone came over to join us. Everyone except for Saya had a flushed face, so they had probably had quite a lot to drink. They seemed more excitable than usual, meaning I knew immediately that they would be more trouble than they were worth.

“Do we have to deal with a bunch of drunks now?”

At that, Yoshin burst out laughing. *Did I say something funny?* Sensing my gaze, Yoshin apologized. “Well, compared to when you were drunk, this lot can’t be so bad.”

Isn’t that an awful thing to say?! I mean, it’s true that I have no recollection of what I was like, but still! Was I that troublesome? Was I really that much of a nuisance?!

I was relieved that Yoshin was back to his normal self, but I also became a little upset. I ended up not knowing how to respond and instead punched him with both fists. I could see everyone laughing at us as they approached.

Yoshin, while being punched, continued apologizing with a smile on his face.

Chapter 3: Her Sister's Thoughts

When I woke up the next morning, Nanami-san was lying next to me, her sleeping face like an angel's. Her face was literally only inches away from my own. *Wait, what? Why?*

This might sound misleading, but when we were sleeping together yesterday, she hadn't been lying this close to me. That was to be expected, really, given that I hadn't even realized we were sleeping in the same bed. Now, though, her face, as she lay with her eyes closed, was super close to mine. When I looked at her from this close up, I realized just how beautiful Nanami-san really was. Is it too old-fashioned to say that her face was almost doll-like?

Her eyelashes were full and long, framing her double-lidded eyes. Her skin was beautiful, and her lips too... *Wait, maybe it's rude of me to study a girl's face like this. I should probably stop.*

When I shifted my gaze away from her face, I saw that she was still wearing her yukata. She was lying facing me, with a blanket draped lightly over her. Her yukata had shifted and opened slightly at the front.

Oh, shoot. It wasn't completely open, but now I didn't know where to look. Having no way to fix the yukata, I pulled the blanket up over her. Nanami-san had bad experiences with guys looking at those kinds of places. I had to restrain myself.

What should I do? I wondered. *Maybe I should get my phone... Oh, dang, it's almost out of battery.* I started up my game and read through the chat log, where Baron-san and the others were making predictions about what I might be doing. *No, I didn't manage to kiss her while basking in the night view. Let's set my phone aside for now.*

Why am I sleeping with Nanami-san, anyway? I thought. When I sat up, I remembered everything—because I saw everyone else asleep around us. My mom, Tomoko-san, and Saya-chan were all sleeping together in the bed next to ours. On the futon at the end of the room, my dad and Genichiro-san were sleeping next to each other.

Last night, when Nanami-san and I had been chatting after our bath, everyone else had come to join us. After that, we'd all ended up getting together in our room, though my mom and Tomoko-san had laid off the alcohol by that point. Even then, they had all seemed way too excited. My mom had even talked about how satisfied she'd been to be able to watch us from the shadows. By the looks of things, they'd

taken a ridiculous number of photos.

Wait, that was weird. The last thing I remembered was Nanami-san and me going to sleep in different beds. How had things ended up like this?

When I glanced at Nanami-san's sleeping face again, I noticed how peaceful she looked. Even seeing her next to me, I still couldn't believe that she was my girlfriend, but she was. This girl with the beautiful sleeping face was my girlfriend.

"Ungh..."

As Nanami-san shifted, the blanket I'd covered her with moved and slid right off of her. The opening of her yukata became exposed again, and naturally, my gaze became glued there.

Yeah, um, I'm not gonna give any explicit details, but because she was lying down, the shape of them had kind of changed, or maybe they were just kind of emphasized. Still, was this normal? *No, wait, me, don't be live streaming this. You were just saying that you were gonna restrain yourself.*

Ashamed that I was awake but could no longer get up, I flopped back down on the bed. The bed bounced slightly under me. Just as I turned my back to Nanami-san, though, I heard a soft voice from behind me.

"Hm... What? What happened?"

Apparently, I'd woken her up. I felt pretty bad about it, but what happened next immediately shoved that feeling aside.

Nanami-san, who was still half asleep, slipped her arms through the gaps between my arms and my body, and grabbed hold of me from behind as if I were a giant body pillow.

"Saya, if you're gonna wake me up, do it nicely, okay? Hm? Have you...grown bigger?"

As Nanami-san hugged me, two soft mounds pressed up against my back with so much gusto that the hug might as well have been accompanied by a loud, squeezing sound effect. The sensation jolted me awake. Well, I guess I was already awake, but my eyes shot open this time.

She continued fidgeting, rubbing her body up against me. *Dang it, just when I felt like I'd calmed down... Now I won't be able to get up again! Shoot, shoot!*

Nanami-san was still half asleep. I had to wake her up.

"Nanami-san, it's not Saya-chan. It's me."

"Who's 'me'? You sound like Yoshin... Wait, huh? Y-Yoshin? Yoshin! What?!"

When Nanami-san realized it was me that she was hugging, she jumped up and scurried away. At the same time, the sensation on my back disappeared. After confirming that fact, I turned back to face her.

“G-Good morning, Nanami-san,” I said.

“G-Good morning, Yoshin. I, uh, guess it’s the second time we’ve slept together, huh?”

Right off the bat, Nanami-san had said something wildly misleading. She immediately corrected herself.

“How did this happen?” she then asked herself in wonder. I’d assumed that, still half asleep, she’d crawled into the same bed as me, but it seemed I was wrong.

Having exchanged our morning greetings, we smiled at each other. It felt slightly embarrassing, but being able to say “good morning” to each other like this actually felt very pleasant. I felt that even more deeply because lately I’d been waking up in a house that was empty aside from me.

I’d been in complete shock when I’d first woken up, but by this point, my head was a little clearer. Earlier, I’d felt like I was in a sleepy daze, but now that was completely gone. I wondered if this, too, was an effect of sleeping with Nanami-san—though of course, I meant “sleeping with Nanami-san” in the most PG way possible.

“Hmm, looks like you’re both wide awake. Good morning.”

Nanami-san and I started at the sudden greeting. Nanami-san’s eyes and mouth grew wide.

“Dad?! Why are you here too? Wait, why is *everyone* here?!” she shouted.

Genichiro-san laughed heartily at Nanami-san’s questions. “Last night, after we had such a great time together, we decided that it only made sense for all of us to sleep here in the same room. I guess we got carried away. Even adults get like that sometimes.”

What kind of adults? Gradually, my memories from the night before became clearer. The adults from both households, who had already had plenty to drink, had begun asking us all sorts of questions and making inappropriate remarks. They wanted to know how far we’d gotten and had told us that we really should’ve kissed. The alcohol had lowered their inhibitions; neither set of parents had hesitated at all when it came to telling us what they’d had on their minds.

Genichiro-san had seemed to be the type to put a stop to such things, but that wasn’t the case at all; in fact, he’d been egging Nanami-san and me on. I supposed that was at least better than having him not accept me as his daughter’s boyfriend.

Still, I got up from the bed and bowed to Genichiro-san deeply. “I’m really sorry, Genichiro-san. I shouldn’t have slept with your daughter like this, never mind two nights in a row.”

“Oh, raise your head, Yoshin-kun. There’s really nothing to worry about.”

Before, Genichiro-san had told me he didn't know what he'd do to me if Nanami-san stayed over at my house. Recalling the blend of bloodlust and rage that seemed to bubble under that comment, I was grateful that he'd simply smiled and forgiven me this time. Seriously, I'd really been bracing myself for a punch in the face.

"After all, I was the one who put Nanami next to you," he added.

So I really didn't have anything to worry about. Except... *What are you doing, Genichiro-san? Didn't you say at the beginning that you wouldn't approve of anything like that? Why are you putting her in my bed?*

Nanami-san let her jaw drop in shock. "Dad... What the hell?" she mumbled, her head in her hands.

Genichiro-san, however, continued laughing cheerfully. Was it just me, or was his gaze warm as he looked at us, as though he were truly delighted by what he saw?

"In any case, I was really surprised to see everyone here," I said.

Nanami-san nodded. "I was surprised too. Dad's always saying that when he comes home drunk, he acts like a spoiled baby and sleeps all close to my mom and stuff."

"You might consider zipping that, Nanami. We're all here, you know?"

I'd have liked to hear a little more, but Genichiro-san had put a quick stop to that. *Genichiro-san, I had no idea...*

Catching me looking at him, Genichiro-san grew red with embarrassment and turned away from us. It was a rather cute reaction coming from him. "Anyways," he said, "since we're up early, maybe we can squeeze in a morning bath. I wonder if the others would like to join us."

Obviously trying to change the subject, Genichiro-san went around asking everyone else if they wanted to join us in the hot springs. Since they all seemed fully awake by now, we decided to go together. Nanami-san seemed slightly unsatisfied seeing as her smart comeback had ended in failure, so I tried to placate her as I gathered everything I'd need for the bath. We all also decided that we'd head straight from the bath to the hotel breakfast.

We all chatted as we made our way downstairs, then separated into the men's and women's baths. Tomoko-san caught sight of the family bath along the way, suggesting that perhaps that would be an even better option, but I shot down the idea politely but firmly.

It seemed what she'd *actually* meant was that it was "an even better option" for me and Nanami-san, but still, I refused with all my might. For a moment, Nanami-san looked at me with a sad expression that seemed to ask, "You don't want to take a bath with me?" but it wasn't that I didn't want to—it was just that all my common sense and

reason were screaming that it was way too early for high school students to be bathing together.

In any case, talking about this kind of thing in front of my parents so early in the morning just wasn't going to happen. It just wasn't. Tomoko-san was just making fun of me.

Despite that teasing, I managed to enjoy my morning bath. The more I thought about it, the more I wondered how many years it'd been since I'd last bathed with my dad. I'd been by myself yesterday and the day before, when we'd first arrived at the hotel. Being there with him was a little embarrassing, but I didn't think I was imagining things when I noticed my dad looking a little bit happier than usual.

Maybe the sense of release that came with bathing got to me, because I ended up having a conversation with him that we wouldn't normally have if we were at home. Calmly, quietly, we talked about mundane subjects, like what our lives had been like recently and how school had been going for me. With Genichiro-san with us too, I, for the very first time, became part of what seemed like a very open and authentic relationship among three men. Although I used to think relationships like that were troublesome, I now genuinely appreciated it.

"Are you happy right now, Yoshin?" my dad suddenly asked. He was smiling and seemed deeply emotional. Genichiro-san waited for my response, not saying anything.

Am I happy right now?

I somehow understood that he wasn't asking me about the "now" in which I was taking a bath with my dad and Genichiro-san. He was asking me whether I was enjoying the "now" of everything that had happened since I'd started dating Nanami-san.

My answer to his question was obvious, but before I articulated it, I looked out at the view and gave it some thought as I sat there soaking in the hot spring. The morning cityscape was enveloped in a light mist, awash in the morning light that made it seem completely different from the view I'd looked upon the night before. I could clearly see the cars that drove by and the ships that sailed past. Seeing them brought about a sense of nostalgia within me. It was a feeling I never got in my house.

Until just a little while ago, what had constituted fun for me had begun and ended in my room. I was sure I could find videos online of a view like this if I just searched for them. They were beautiful, sure, and I would have been satisfied by that much.

But, in just a brief period of time, my world had become so much larger, and that growth had started with an unexpected encounter. It was something I'd learned to feel after spending my days with Nanami-san. That was why, without question, my response was...

“I am.”

Those were the only two words I said. *I am*. I truly was happy right now. It wasn't a lie. My dad and Genichiro-san both nodded at my answer, satisfied.

Sharing how I felt was embarrassing—especially with my dad—but today, I felt like I was able to tell him how I felt just a tad bit more honestly than usual. I didn't know if that was because we were bathing or because we were on this trip.

“That's a good expression you've got there. I'm glad to see my son growing up.”

His comment made me feel both glad and itchy inside. I felt my face growing hot—and not just from the hot water.

“Your son is a fine young man,” Genichiro-san said.

“He really is. And it's all thanks to Nanami-san,” my dad replied.

“Oh, not at all. This is all Yoshin-kun.”

Hearing both of them compliment me made me feel even more embarrassed. They were having such a calm conversation that it was hard to believe they'd both gotten drunk and fallen asleep together last night. I didn't bring that up, though, since I didn't want to ruin the mood.

I, too, believed that this was all thanks to Nanami-san. How this had all started might have been somewhat ironic, but I would never have guessed that I'd be able to change so much since then.

We chatted a bit more and then decided to get out of the hot spring. I would have liked to down another bottle of milk, but I knew I had breakfast coming.

Just as we were exiting the men's changing room, we saw the women coming out from their own changing room. The three of us had wondered if we'd have to wait for them, but it seemed we'd timed it perfectly.

When I caught sight of Nanami-san, I thought I detected a change in the way she looked at me. She seemed both shy and also somehow expectant at the same time as she kept looking at me and then looking away. Whenever our eyes met, her gaze fell as though she was embarrassed.

The other women were all smiling happily. What the heck had they been talking about in there? I was pretty sure they wouldn't tell me, even if I asked.

Nanami-san, too, noticed the smiles on their faces. She slapped her own cheeks lightly, as if trying to pump herself up about something. She then smiled in her usual way, as if switching from one mode to another. At first glance, she seemed the same as usual, but I couldn't be sure.

“Aaah, I'm all freshened up, and now I'm starving! Breakfast will

be fun, huh?" she said to me.

"Uh, yeah. Absolutely."

"Hm? Aren't you hungry, Yoshin?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm hungry. I'm looking forward to the buffet."

Nanami-san was smiling as she walked beside me. What was her earlier look about? I was kind of afraid to ask, but if it wasn't anything bad, she was bound to tell me about it at some point. Judging from the embarrassed expression on her face earlier, I could only guess that the others had filled her head with some new inappropriate piece of advice.

When it came to that, I was in no position to say anything. I was receiving all sorts of advice from Baron-san and the others. I know the details weren't quite the same, but they were similar in nature.

Nanami-san and I continued walking, but I took smaller steps so that I'd end up walking behind the group. Nanami-san followed my lead and ended up walking with me. Together, we trailed behind everyone else.

Watching the others walking ahead of us, I lightly touched Nanami-san's hand. She seemed surprised and widened her eyes. After a moment, she caught on to my intentions and brushed her hand against mine in return. My hand curled lightly around hers.

It was a normal way of holding hands, without having our fingers entwined, but even then, I could feel my heart beating faster. That maybe, *probably*, had nothing to do with the fact that I'd just gotten out of the bath.

Holding hands furtively so that the others wouldn't see, Nanami-san and I continued our slow walk to the dining hall.



I once heard someone say that predictions are our imaginings about the future. I don't remember who said it, but a true prediction is supposedly one where you make a guess about what will happen, based on past life experiences.

Making an accurate prediction is more difficult than I thought. Supposedly, you have to have a rich set of life experiences in order to do so. And, supposedly, an unpredictable occurrence is unpredictable precisely *because* something that you've never experienced before occurs.

I feel bad about saying "supposedly" so much, but I remember feeling oddly convinced when I first heard this. It was true, even when I was playing games, that the unexpected occurred when said events didn't fit into the pattern of previous games.

In reality, though, plenty of unpredictable events occurred. Based on the wise words of the person I can't even remember, the fact that so many unpredictable things happened around me only attested to the fact that I didn't have a terribly rich set of life experiences. I'd only managed to build my experiences in games.

Maybe I should look at it this way: there was a lot of room for me to grow and have new experiences moving forward. That is, I had a lot of potential. I know that might be kind of pushing it, but I'm allowed to have an optimistic view of things, aren't I?

I know I sound like I'm thinking about something serious, but there's a reason for all this—and of course, there's only one reason for it. And that reason is that yet another unpredictable thing had just happened to me.

"I really didn't see this one coming..."

At that moment, I was sitting under a tree full of cherry blossoms, sipping orange juice. Since we had a car ride ahead of us, even the adults were drinking nonalcoholic beverages, like oolong tea.

To explain why we were where we were would require us to go back in time to breakfast. As Nanami-san and I were having something sweet to finish off our meal, Saya-chan and Tomoko-san both came over to sit beside us.

"Hey, do you guys know our plans for today?" Saya-chan asked.

Nanami-san and I looked at each other. Our plans for today? Weren't we heading straight home? We were both thinking something to that extent, but Saya-chan let out a sigh before looking up at Tomoko-san and glaring slightly. Tomoko-san laughed delightedly.

"Mom, you really need to tell them these things."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought I had, but it seems I forgot in all the

excitement.” Tomoko-san smiled, her hand on her cheek as Saya-chan continued glaring at her. Despite her remark, she didn’t seem at all apologetic.

Saya-chan sighed and mumbled something about her mother doing it on purpose, but Tomoko-san giggled softly.

“We thought it’d be nice if we stopped by to see the cherry blossoms on the way home,” she said.

“Cherry blossoms?” Nanami-san and I both asked, surprised by the suggestion. It seemed the two of us were the only ones who didn’t know yet. Saya-chan looked slightly exasperated at the situation.

I asked my parents, but it seemed they’d assumed I already knew about it. They told me they’d missed the chance to remind me about it because Nanami-san and I were always flirting with each other, which left me utterly speechless. Still, I told myself that if we were just adding a stop on our way home, it shouldn’t be such a big deal.

With our plan sorted, we drove for ten minutes or so. The park we were headed to was relatively close to the hotel. It was a beautiful place, filled with cherry blossoms and other flowers in bloom. Some of the cherry trees had already turned from flowers to leaves, but even still, many of the blossoms remained. The contrast between the green and the pink was beautiful.

The trees grew along a footpath that circled a lake, together with red and yellow flowers, although I wasn’t sure what they were called. It seemed you were able to enjoy the view of a wide variety of colorful flowers here. Taking a walk around a place like this was sure to be a pleasant experience.

“If we’d come a bit earlier in the year, everything would’ve been in full bloom, but it’s not like we’ve missed all the flowers. I’m sure we’ll still be able to enjoy the cherry blossoms,” Genichiro-san said. Apparently, this wasn’t the first time he’d come here. He explained they used to visit back when Nanami-san and Saya-chan were little.

While Nanami-san looked around nostalgically, I tried to contain my excitement for visiting a place I’d never been before. We then made our way through the park. It seemed the adults had a particular spot in mind for us to visit, so I let them take the lead and followed them.

Along the way, Nanami-san told me about the various memories she had of the park. “One time, when I was little, I almost fell into that pond there...or did I actually fall in?”

“What?! But there’s a fence around it! Do you think they put it up because you fell in?” I asked.

“Nah, I’m pretty sure I climbed over the fence. Maybe it was because I’d gotten in a fight with my dad. Kids really do crazy stuff when they’re upset, huh?”

While Nanami-san was talking as if these were someone else's memories, I couldn't help wondering if she'd been a rather aggressive child when she was younger. Or maybe she didn't really remember. Given her present-day behavior, I had a tough time imagining the scene.

No, wait. Considering how forward she'd been lately, maybe I could see it. As I stared at her, Nanami-san scratched her cheek, slightly embarrassed.

That forwardness aside, though, I couldn't really imagine Nanami-san getting angry. I wondered if a day would come when I, too, would make her angry. Would we be able to make up if that happened? I sure hoped we could.

"You climbed over the fence, huh? I'm glad you made it out safe," I murmured.

"That's 'cause dad helped me. Besides, I'm not that bad at swimming."

"It's still dangerous to swim with your clothes on. Wait, doesn't that mean you definitely fell in?"

At that, Nanami-san's eyes widened. She then stuck out her tongue and winked at me as if covering for her mistake. It was a classic "tee hee" expression. *Where did she learn a trick like that? This can't be down to me, can it? Or am I being too full of myself? Right, of course not. It was just a coincidence; her gesture was totally accidental.*

"Oh? Do you not like it when people react like that?" she asked.

Okay, it definitely was my fault. No, I do like it—it's cute.

As I was left speechless, Nanami-san began to say something else when Saya-chan interrupted us. "Hey, quit flirting, you two, and help us set up!"

Nanami-san swallowed whatever it was she was about to say and brought her face close to my ear. "Later, yeah?"

I wondered what she wanted to say. Without getting to ask her, I followed her closer to the rest of the group.

Everyone else was getting ready under the cherry tree. An array of equipment had already been laid out, though I had no idea when they'd gotten hold of it. Food had also been prepared.

"I'm pretty sure this is my first time having a barbecue outside," I mumbled.

My parents were setting things up a little ways away, leaving me alone with Nanami-san's family. In fact, I'd never seen my parents so eagerly engaged in a task before.

"Your parents said they felt bad they couldn't take you camping and things because they've always been too busy," Genichiro-san replied. "This isn't quite camping, but it'd be great if you could enjoy yourself a bit."

Tomoko-san laughed lightly. "My husband likes camping, but the girls aren't the biggest fans. He was really looking forward to today."

"Can you blame me?" Saya-chan asked. "Sleeping outside is really tough, and I can't even take a bath. I do like coming on day trips, though."

Seeing Genichiro-san, who looked just as excited as my parents did, I couldn't help feeling happy myself. Tomoko-san and Saya-chan, too, seemed like they were having a good time.

As I talked with everyone, I began to get psyched up about seeing all the unfamiliar equipment. I never realized my parents felt that way about how we spent our time together. Still, I wished they didn't worry so much. I was an indoor person anyway, so even if someone had invited me to go camping, there wasn't much chance of me nodding and saying, "Yeah, let's!" If my parents had asked me to go, either I would've been puzzled or I would've outright refused, so to find myself so excited about today felt strange. I felt somehow embarrassed that I'd ended up having this talk with Genichiro-san instead of with my own dad.

I'd messaged Baron-san and the others earlier, letting them know I'd gone to view the cherry blossoms and that I'd catch up with them later. Both Baron-san and Peach-san had wished me well before I'd headed off, but I hadn't even touched my phone since then. If I'd found myself in a situation like this a month ago, I'm sure I would've been wondering whether I could sneak off to play my game or something.

We spread out our picnic blankets and even set a table. *Did mom and dad always own something like that?* I wondered. Or did they rent it? Apparently, it was from home, but I didn't recognize it. But more importantly...

"Oh, Yoshin! Over here!"

Nanami-san, who had been helping my parents set up, waved to me while jumping up and down. The sky was a clear blue, with just a few clouds floating by, and the temperature was comfortably warm. It was hands down a perfect day.

I watched as white and pink petals from the cherry blossoms—as well as a few green leaves—danced slowly on the breeze and drifted around Nanami-san, who was waving at me under the clear blue sky. She smiled at me as she stood against a backdrop that appeared almost like a painting.

I stopped in my tracks. I couldn't help looking at her. *She's beautiful*, I thought—though it was out of character for me to do so.

"How beautiful. Don't you think, Yoshin-kun?" Genichiro-san asked.

"Yeah, beautiful. Really beautiful."

Without asking what he'd been referring to, I'd opened my mouth and quietly expressed my agreement. Nanami-san tilted her head, wondering why I hadn't taken a step forward. Even her confusion looked beautiful to me.

Although I wanted to take a photo of her, my body refused to cooperate. *Even if I can't have a record of it, it's fine as long as it stays in my memory*, I said to myself, again uncharacteristically.

While I was thinking that, though, I noticed Tomoko-san taking a picture of the scene. I glanced at her, trying to ask her with just my gaze to send me the photo later. Tomoko-san nodded back in silence, which I took to mean that she'd understood.

"Since Nanami and your parents are waiting, let's pause for now and get this party started, shall we? You can leave the preparations to me," Genichiro-san said.

"Are you sure I shouldn't be helping?" I asked.

"This is for the adults to enjoy. You kids can sit back and relax for a while," he replied.

"That's right," said my dad, who had also joined us. "You should go take a breather with the others, Yoshin."

He and Genichiro-san both made fists, signaling something to each other. I told them I felt bad doing that, but they firmly refused to accept my help. After going back and forth for a bit, I finally backed down.

"In that case, I'll take a back seat. Thanks again," I told them.

Dad and Genichiro-san nodded happily. Then the three of us made our way toward the rest of the group. Nanami-san smiled at me as I approached. "This is gonna be fun, huh?" she asked.

"Yeah, let's make the most of it," I replied.

Although this wasn't a date with just the two of us, we knew all the same that the day would be fun.

The adults had arranged several outdoor chairs around our picnic blankets. Saya-chan was already relaxing on one of them. Nanami-san and I chose a couple of seats beside her. Settling my weight into the chair, I craned my neck to look up at the sky.

"The sun feels nice, huh, Yoshin? It's so warm, it makes me kinda sleepy," Nanami-san murmured.

"Yeah... But is it really okay to relax like this?"

Saya-chan glanced at us. "Why the heck not? The two of you should get a break too once in a while."

The three of us sat back as we gazed up at the cherry blossoms above. The white flowers tinged with pale pink looked truly delightful against the clear blue sky. I glanced over at my dad and Genichiro-san, who were preparing to light the grill with the charcoal.

I'd never gone camping, so of course I'd never had a cookout

either. I'd assumed my dad hadn't really had one either, but apparently I was wrong. The two dads set up the grill and then lit the charcoal. Although I'd offered to help, the two of them seemed set on doing it by themselves, so I took their word for it and sat back, still feeling slightly guilty.

They'd told me that, given how long it had been since they'd last done this, they wanted to take the opportunity to get back into the groove of things. Apparently, they'd used to do this kind of thing a lot back when they were younger, so they were actually looking forward to it. Personally, I'd wanted them to take a bit of a break after having planned the whole trip themselves, but when I realized I'd be taking away their fun, I decided to leave the fire up to them.

"Yoshin, Nanami-san, Saya-chan, which would you like: tea or juice?" mom asked as I was watching the dads. Nanami-san and I both got tea, while Saya-chan got juice.

As we drank, we sighed and felt... What was this feeling? It was like time was passing incredibly slowly. Did time always pass so slowly when you stepped away from the rush of daily life?

Standing next to the dads, the two moms were preparing cheese and other finger foods, arranging them all fancily on a tray. *When did they have time to buy all that stuff?* I couldn't help but wonder.

I offered to help them as well, but they also refused, saying that they wanted to do it themselves. In fact, they refused in the exact same way that the dads had. I wasn't sure, but I was starting to think that this was how adults enjoyed themselves.

After we'd finished our drinks, Tomoko-san turned to us. "It'll be some time before the food's ready, so why don't you three go for a walk? The weather's nice, so I bet it'll be lovely."

A walk around the park, huh? It was warm, and the weather was great, making it the perfect day for a walk. Tomoko-san was probably on to something.

"Shall we go, Nanami-san?" I asked.

"Yeah, that sounds really nice. What do you say, Saya?"

"I think I'll pass. Why don't you two go without me? With all the club activities wearing me down, I came hoping to take yesterday and today off to rest up. So I'm just gonna do nothing. This comfy chair isn't letting go. Mr. Chair here'll be my boyfriend today."

Saya-chan smiled warmly as she lounged in her chair. She took a sip of her juice and then asked Tomoko-san for a piece of cheese, which she took a bite out of, seeming content. Seeing Saya-chan looking so relaxed, Nanami-san and I smiled wryly and looked at each other.

"Well then, shall we go?" Nanami-san asked.

"Yeah, let's," I said, getting up and extending my hand to her.

Nanami-san smiled softly and then gently accepted it.

Once we were both up, we let go of each other's hand. We bowed quickly to the others and then set off around the park. "Good luck," Saya-chan said softly as we walked away.

Hearing her, I turned around and saw that she was smiling warmly at us. When she noticed me looking at her, she gave me a thumbs-up. I returned the gesture, and she stuck her tongue out. *She's such a good kid*, I thought.

"Something wrong?" Nanami-san asked.

"No, nothing. Shall we take a look around?"

With that, we began making our way around the park. We were too embarrassed to hold hands in front of others, but we maintained a close distance between us as we began chatting.

"Maybe they're doing too much for us," I said, a little concerned. It wasn't just our parents; even Saya-chan seemed to have taken a step back to give us some time alone together. Was it really okay for them to spoil us so much?

"Well, they did kinda plan all this beforehand, and I'm pretty sure they *wanted* to do a lot of the prep work themselves. That's just how my dad usually is, to be honest," Nanami-san said.

"Oh, really? I had no idea my parents were into this sort of thing."

"That's okay, though, don't you think? We should just take them up on their offer and be grateful for it. Plus we get to be by ourselves." Nanami-san linked her arm with mine. She seemed to be in a mood today.

Naturally, I had no desire to refuse. I readily accepted her arm through mine. Seeing as how she'd only moved to do so once we'd gotten far enough to be out of sight, she must have felt just as embarrassed as I did doing this sort of thing around them.

It had been a while since we'd last linked arms together. We continued walking through the park slowly, taking a while to get used to it.

Aside from the cherry trees, red and yellow flowers were in full bloom on both sides of the path. A gentle breeze accompanied us, making our walk incredibly pleasant.

"I wonder what that flower's called. It's really pretty," Nanami-san said.

"Yeah, you're right. Do you want a photo next to them?" I asked.

"Um, not yet. We can walk around a bit first."

"Sure, I guess."

We continued walking like that, just the two of us, along the path under the cherry blossoms as the grass reflected the sunlight, its vivid color making it appear like a green carpet. The white and pale-pink cherry blossoms on the boughs of the trees on the lawn swayed in the

wind.

I wondered if these trees had been filled with blossoms at the peak of the season. If so, it must have been a breathtaking sight. Still, this view of white, pink, and green mixed together was breathtaking too.

When the wind blew, the branches around us rustled, letting a shower of flower petals fall around us. The pink and white petals looked like snowflakes as they danced on the breeze. The ground, covered with those petals, was beautiful as well, as though it had collected snow.

The warm breeze felt pleasant as it softly brushed against our cheeks. Being able to leisurely stroll like this with the person you liked, in such a gentle atmosphere, was pure heaven.

"This is nice, huh?" Nanami-san asked, smiling softly. "It might not be a typical high school date, but it feels gentle and relaxing."

It seemed that she was feeling the same way as I was. She was right that taking a walk didn't seem like a terribly exciting date, but a date like this wasn't bad at all every once in a while. After all, being giddy wasn't the only way to be a high schooler.

As Nanami-san and I continued our peaceful conversation, we came to a path where the cherry trees on both sides stretched over the path to create a tunnel. We were surrounded by cherry blossoms, their fallen petals creating white designs on the ground.

"Wow, that's amazing. I wonder if it all happened naturally," I said.

"Yeah, it's really pretty. Should we walk through it?" Nanami-san suggested.

We made our way through the cherry blossom tunnel. Above us was a ceiling of white and pale pink. The falling petals created an illusion of walking through warm snow. We slowed down our pace to better enjoy the view.

"Shall I take a photo, Nanami-san?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

Seeing such beautiful scenery had made me want to take a photo of her. Luckily, Nanami-san had agreed, nodding quietly at my suggestion. We took photos of each other and then also asked a family passing by to take a photo of the two of us together. They were kind enough to stop and oblige, and in return, I took a photo of them as well. After we thanked them, we continued on our way.

We soon came across a small pond surrounded by a fence. Even more cherry trees were growing around the pond. The fallen petals covered the water's surface like a thick blanket. A boat was making its way across the pond. The petals disappeared in its wake as the boat left ripples in the water. Once it had passed, the petals returned to cover the surface.

“Wow, that’s a really big pond. I wonder if there are fish swimming in it,” Nanami-san said.

“Hmm, I don’t know.”

Nanami-san slipped away from me and approached the fence. She then leaned over it toward the pond. I was walking close behind her when Nanami-san let out a small shriek.

It seemed the grass beneath her was wet, because Nanami-san slipped and lost her balance. The fence around the pond was much shorter than we were, making it low enough to climb over.

As she lost her footing, Nanami-san fell toward the fence. In a panic, I called her name and tugged on her hand, pulling her toward me with as much force as possible. I pulled her so hard that I worried I hurt her arm, hugging her tightly to my chest so that she wouldn’t fall.

“Nanami-san, are you okay?! It’s dangerous around the pond! You have to be careful!” I exclaimed.

“Th-Thanks. I slipped and panicked, so, um...”

With her small form in my embrace, I could feel the warmth of her body against mine and noticed her heartbeat quickening. Mine, too, was much faster than before, but that wasn’t just because I’d panicked. The answer should have been obvious, but had I ever held her like this before?

Although I’d pulled her close in the heat of the moment, I was now just embracing her for the warmth of her body. Knowing I couldn’t stay like this forever, though, I loosened my hold on her. Her body naturally shifted away from mine.

What happens when you lean away from each other while still embracing soon became clear to me. We ended up standing, still attached to each other, staring into each other’s eyes.

I wasn’t sure if it was because I’d suddenly pulled her close or because I was staring at her from such close range. What I did know was that my heart was beating even faster than it had been moments before, so much so that it hurt.

Nanami-san was blushing. Her eyes seemed to sparkle. We stared into each other’s eyes, and—

“Mommy, what are they doing?”

“Shh... Don’t bother them. Let’s go.”

“Mommy and daddy sometimes stick to each other like that too. Do you think they’re also a mommy and daddy?”

“Shh! Time to put a zipper on it, sweetie. Let’s go.”

Those voices brought us back to our senses.

Yeah, that was to be expected, wasn’t it? We *were* in a park with lots of families with little kids. We probably should’ve practiced more self-restraint. Having been called a “mommy and daddy” by a little

kid, Nanami-san and I took a step away from each other. We fell silent, fidgeting a little, but we couldn't stay that way forever. Slowly, I reached out my hand toward her, the heat still in my cheeks.

"Should we head back now?" I asked.

"Y-Yes, let's do that. They're probably all ready by now, right?"

After linking arms, we walked back along the path to the place where everyone else was waiting. Along the way, we were much less talkative than we were before.

"My, oh my, would you look at that?" Tomoko-san said.

"Hmm, that short walk alone seems to have brought you two a lot closer. Nicely done, Yoshin," my mom said.

Shoot, I knew they'd make fun of us, so I was planning on letting go before we got back. I totally messed up the timing! The two moms both smiled and gave us two thumbs-up.

"Welcome back, guys," Saya-chan called. "We started without you. This meat's super good! I'm gonna eat it all."

She was chowing down on the meat the dads had been grilling, while munching on a rice ball. Saya-chan was even being fed the meat by my mom. *These two really have become close.*

I know this is obvious, but Saya-chan truly was Nanami-san's little sister. Saya-chan, just like Nanami-san, was really good at getting along with people. She was so completely different from me.

Genichiro-san and my dad were grilling meat for themselves and shouting, "Cheers to the happy couple!" Were they drunk? No. We didn't have any alcoholic drinks with us, so they must just have been really amped up. I don't think I'd ever seen my dad act like this before.

"Sit down, you two. You must be starving. We'll cook up more meat, so dig in."

A delicious aroma of beef, marinated lamb and pork, and sausage came wafting over from the grill, accompanied by saliva-inducing sizzling sounds. The onions, carrots, and other vegetables had the most perfect grill marks on them. On the table was a salad of tomatoes, mozzarella cheese, and chicken, as well as finger food like cheese and crackers. There were even sweeter treats like fruit and marshmallows. *When did they have time to buy all this? I wondered. Did they go shopping when we were off on our own yesterday?*

"Oh, I like these," Nanami-san said, picking up a cracker from the table and eating it in one bite. She then handed one to me as well. "Here, Yoshin. Give it a try."

There was cheese and a slice of apple on the cracker, with syrup drizzled on top. When I put it in my mouth, the saltiness of the cheese, the acidity of the apple, and the sweetness of the syrup all melded together and spread throughout my mouth.

“Wow, this is really good. It tastes like a dessert. I wonder if it’s a snack for when you’re drinking alcohol.”

“Yeah, dad likes to eat these when he has a drink at home, but it really does taste like dessert, huh?”

“Here, you two,” Tomoko-san called out. “The meat over here is done. There’re drinks too, so take what you want. Oh, but don’t worry, there’s no alcohol—especially for Nanami, given her record.”

“Mom! Don’t bring that up! And I wouldn’t drink alcohol even if there was any!”

“Th-Thank you, Tomoko-san. It looks delicious,” I said.

I took the plate of grilled meat from Tomoko-san and began sharing it with Nanami-san. Maybe because grilling it had let all the excess fat drip off or because it had the scent of charcoal, the meat tasted different from how it did when it was cooked like usual in a frying pan. Also, the sausage had cheese in it; I almost burned my tongue from the heat of it when I bit in. Despite my burnt tongue, though, everything was utterly delicious. The fact that we were eating under a blue sky must also have played a part in bringing out the flavors.

“It’s good, right?” Nanami-san asked. “Oh, which rice ball do you want? There’s tuna, salmon, or kombu.”

“Oh, the kombu one then, please.”

When I bit into the rice ball she handed me, I discovered that it complimented the meat perfectly. I found myself enjoying the meal more than expected, becoming engrossed in the food, perhaps because of the walk.

Eating together under the open sky, chatting, and having a good time would have been unthinkable for the hermit I was before.

With our bellies full, Nanami-san and I lay down next to each other on the picnic blanket. That was when I noticed there were flower petals stuck to her hair and face. As I gently picked them off, Nanami-san and I looked at each other and smiled. We were in our own world, completely silent in the midst of everyone else’s conversation.

Basking in the gentle warmth of the sun, we forgot the passing of time and simply enjoyed the flowers. Nanami-san and I lay on the blanket and watched the cherry blossoms as their petals fell around us, while everyone else also enjoyed themselves in their own way. The dads were engaged in conversation, while the moms were also chatting. They seemed to be enjoying each other’s company even more than the flowers. Both their conversations were between adults—we couldn’t join in, nor did we want to. I wondered if one day I, too, would have a conversation like that.

As I thought about the future, I heard the sounds of Nanami-san’s

gentle breathing. It seemed that she'd dozed off in the warmth of the sunlight. All the day's activities must have worn her out. I took off my jacket and draped it over her before sitting back down.

I know my phone's low on battery, but maybe I should give Baron-san an update. I'd feel bad waking Nanami-san up. Oh, but I also kinda want to take a photo...

Just as I was contemplating what to do, I saw a shadow loom over me. It settled down in front of me as my camera went off and made a shutter noise.

That shadow belonged to Saya-chan.

Saya-chan glanced over at Nanami-san, then, with her catlike eyes identical to Nanami-san's, looked at me and smiled. "Hey, onii-chan, do you wanna chat for a bit? You know, 'cause we've never really talked, just the two of us."

I was a bit thrown off by her sudden proposal. It was true that Saya-chan and I had never really had the chance to talk face-to-face, just the two of us, though technically Nanami-san was sleeping next to us right now.

"Oh, don't look at me like that. I'm not planning to ask you any weird questions or anything. I just want to hear about my sister," she said.

"When I hear you call me 'onii-chan,' it makes me feel all weird. I'm an only child, so I've never been called that by my relatives either," I said.

"Does it actually bother you?"

"Oh, no. It's not that. I was the one who said you could call me that, though I guess I do wonder why you wanted to call me that in the first place."

"Hmm. I suppose I call you that because I'm pretty sure you're gonna marry my sister one day."

Wow, that was quite a declaration. *Marriage, huh? Genichiro-san and Tomoko-san mentioned something like that before too. Aren't the people in this family getting a bit ahead of themselves? Well, maybe my parents are too. It's like the walls around me are going up at lightning speed, preventing me from getting out.*

I felt like I'd dig myself a deeper hole if I pursued the matter further, so I decided to let the topic drop. This was one of those things where you'd end up shoveling deeper no matter how you approached it.

"What did you want to hear about Nanami-san?" I asked.

"Hmm. Well, I guess there's lots of things, but for starters, what do you like most about her?"

Unprepared for her question, I broke out in a sweat, and my heart skipped a beat. Even though Nanami-san was asleep, this wasn't an

easy question to answer with her lying there next to us. Still, I felt more embarrassed by the thought of having her hear my response through someone else—though I suppose saying it to her directly would be pretty embarrassing as well.

“What are you gonna do if I tell you?” I asked.

“Well, I hear a lot from onee-chan about what she likes about you, but I realized I’ve never heard anything from you before.”

What on earth do you talk about when I’m not there, Nanami-san? I wondered. I began to feel even more embarrassed, but Saya-chan was still looking at me, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

What I like about her... What I like about her, huh? Now that someone had posed the question to me, I realized I’d never thought too much about it before. In fact, I felt like there were so many things I liked about her that I couldn’t really pick a favorite.

“Is it her big titties?” Saya-chan suggested, lifting up her own breasts with both of her hands.

“No,” I declared. “I mean, it’s not that I dislike them. I just feel like girls shouldn’t say things like ‘titties.’”

“Jeez, even you say the same thing my friends say.”

If you say it while making a gesture like that, of course I will. If she’d been doing this sort of thing in class too, the boys were in for all sorts of awkward moments. As I sat there chiding her, I tried to consider her question.

What I like about her... What I like about her...

I liked how caring she was, her making bento for me and tutoring me. I liked how adorable she was, being forward with me at times but then turning all red when I gave her a taste of her own medicine. I liked how generous she was, how understanding she was of the things I liked, and how she would try to share in them with me. I liked how committed she was, continuing to like me despite all those things. Of course, that was assuming she liked me. More than anything, though, I liked how warm and kind she was, how she was always thinking about me more than anyone else.

Once I got started, I just couldn’t stop. If I had to choose one thing, though...

“I like how lovely she is,” I said.

“You mean her looks?” Saya-chan asked.

“Nah, more her personality, like how caring and generous she is and how sometimes she self-destructs and turns all red. I guess all those gentle things about her make her the lovely person she is.”

“Yeah, she really is kind, isn’t she? In that sense, you’re perfect for her. I’ve never seen anyone as kind as you,” Saya-chan said.

I’d had no idea Saya-chan thought that about me. Although I felt honored, I also felt slightly embarrassed. *Was that a good enough*

response to satisfy her?

However, my sense of relief came too soon. Saya-chan looked at me with a teasing smile very much reminiscent of Nanami-san's and asked, "And? What do you like most about her looks?"

Oooh, her looks, huh? What a difficult question to answer. I felt like any response I gave was bound to rub someone the wrong way. Did she really want to know?

"Is it her titties?" Saya-chan suggested again.

"Why do you keep rooting for her boobs so much? What are you trying to get me to say?"

"The guys in class are always saying, 'Girls've gotta have big titties.' I just wondered if all guys liked them. Onee-chan's boobs are super soft. I mean, *super* soft. They're amazing!"

Right... Having experienced some of that myself, I didn't know how to respond. No, I hadn't touched them. They'd just been pressed against me; that was all. They'd been pressed up against me by accident, honest. I could understand that middle schoolers couldn't help looking at or thinking about breasts. As for me, though... When Saya-chan had asked me what I liked about Nanami-san's looks, the first thing I thought of hadn't been her breasts.

"I'd say...her eyes. Nanami-san has beautiful eyes."

"Her eyes? Not her boobs, not her butt, but her eyes? Onii-chan, you sure do have a strange fetish."

"Where did you learn a word like that? No, it's not a 'fetish.' It's just that her eyes... Don't you think they're pretty?"

The more I thought about it, the more I realized just how much I liked it when Nanami-san looked right at me with her large, jewellike eyes. Sometimes they wavered with anxiety, but when she looked at me with such gentleness, I always felt my heart growing warmer.

"Her eyes, huh? I see. That's an unexpected response," Saya-chan muttered. She crossed her arms, as though deep in thought.

I was pretty sure I hadn't said anything strange, but somehow, I still felt nervous, like I was being judged. Saya-chan glanced away from me and looked down at Nanami-san.

"Isn't that great, onee-chan? Onii-chan is totally in love with you," Saya-chan said to her.

With that, Nanami-san—who I'd thought was asleep—shook slightly. *Huh? Wait, was she awake?*

Red-faced, Nanami-san slowly sat up and glared at Saya-chan. "Saaayaaa, what was all that about? I was so embarrassed I couldn't move."

Wondering how much she'd heard, I blushed from embarrassment, unable to look Nanami-san in the eyes. Saya-chan was smiling cheerfully as she looked at us both.

“Well, you know, I was wondering why my sister, who was so awkward around guys, was somehow able to date you, but now I feel like I understand. I guess it’s because he’s like this that you feel comfortable with him.”

“That’s right; it’s *because* it’s Yoshin that I’m okay. Don’t make me say it. It’s embarrassing.”

Wearing an exact replica of her mother’s gentle smile, Saya-chan was gazing contentedly at her older sister. Still, their exchange was really embarrassing.

Saya-chan turned to me and, adjusting herself so that she was sitting on her heels, bowed her head. “Please be good to my sister, Yoshin-san,” she said.

The simple words seemed filled to the brim with Saya-chan’s feelings for her sister. She clearly loved Nanami-san, which must have been why she had taken up the opportunity to quiz me. Maybe, deep down, she’d been plagued with worry and anxiety.

“Yes. I most definitely will,” I replied, sitting on my heels and straightening my posture to bow back. Perhaps this had helped us to resolve some things and brought down the wall that seemed to exist between us.

When we both raised our heads at the same time, Saya-chan smiled a much more age-appropriate smile and drew closer to me. “In that case, can you introduce me to a good-looking guy from your school?! Seeing you and Nanami together makes me want a boyfriend, but there’s no one my own age who seems all that cool.”

Wow, that was quick! Suddenly, Saya-chan’s serious aura was gone; she was back to being the innocent middle school girl she was.

“Introduce you? I don’t really have enough friends to be able to introduce you to anyone,” I told her.

“Reeeally? You say and do all that to my sister, and yet you don’t have that many friends? Jeez, you sure are a man of extremes.”

I tried searching on my phone for some photos, but the only images in my album were screenshots from games or photos I’d taken after I’d started dating Nanami-san. Or, to be more specific, I really only had photos of Nanami-san. The only photo of a guy I had on my phone was of Shibetsu-senpai. Wait...Shibetsu-senpai, huh?

“Oh, wow. This guy is super good-looking! Plus he’s super tall! Look how much taller he is than you!”

Saya-chan, who had moved to stand behind me unnoticed, was staring excitedly at Shibetsu-senpai’s photo. I knew he was good-looking and all, but I supposed even Saya-chan thought that he was handsome, huh? Hearing her say it reaffirmed the fact in my mind. I supposed in these last few weeks, my impression of senpai had changed to that of a really funny upperclassman.

"Yeah, he is. Shibetsu-senpai's handsome and all, but..."

"Oh, is this the guy my sister dumped because he kept looking at her boobs? Ah, so that's what he's like."

Saya-chan had articulated my concern before I could even spit it out. When I looked over at Nanami-san, she was sticking her tongue out with a troubled expression on her face. I supposed she'd already told her sister about him.

"Hmm, my boobs aren't as big as onee-chan's, so maybe it won't work. But if he confessed to her, maybe I have a shot too. Hey, onii-chan, the next time we see each other, introduce him to me, okay?"

"I mean, if that's what you want, then that's fine by me, but..." I glanced over at Nanami-san again. She looked just as perplexed as I was.

I supposed the idea of introducing her own little sister to a guy who'd previously confessed to her made her feel a little conflicted. I guess I was the one who was supposed to introduce them to each other, though. Even so, it might be a tall order.

"Um, I told you before, but senpai couldn't keep his eyes off my chest. Are you okay with that, Saya? He's not a bad person, but... I also realize that I misunderstood him at first, and he truly is a really nice person, but..."

"Oh, wow. You're complimenting someone other than onii-chan. This is rare. He must be a really good person," Saya-chan said. As she pointed out, Nanami-san's assessment of senpai had improved slightly.

Yeah, he definitely was a good person, but the question was whether it was appropriate to introduce a younger sister to someone the older sister had already rejected. *That isn't appropriate, right?* At least, that was what Nanami-san and I were thinking, but it seemed Saya-chan didn't see an issue with it. She seemed puzzled at my and Nanami-san's hesitation.

"What are you talking about? No matter how old they get, boys will always like boobies. It's perfectly normal for them to stare at big boobs. Besides, it's not like we're immediately gonna start dating—you're just gonna introduce me to him. I just wanna know what he's like, that's all."

Both Nanami-san and I were astonished. Was this kid more mature than her age? She was a middle school student, right? Was this really how middle schoolers thought about things nowadays? I supposed Peach-san was a middle school student too, and she also said a lot of mature things, now that I thought about it. Or maybe Saya-chan was similar to Tomoko-san in terms of her personality. Perhaps that was a better way to think about it.

"Besides, onee-chan, did you forget? I'm on the dance team. A dancer can't complain about being looked at. Though maybe with

your size, it gets kind of difficult to dance.”

“Was that sexual harassment coming from my own little sister?!” Nanami-san shrieked.

Saya-chan proceeded to grab Nanami-san’s breasts and to grope them as if she were examining them. I immediately looked away, thinking this was a sight best not to see, but then...

“Hey! Saya, wha—?! Stop!”

When I turned away—or perhaps *because* I turned away—Nanami-san’s shouts of protests grew louder. I heard the sounds of rustling fabric as she began to yell louder and louder.

What the hell are you two doing?! I thought. My imagination was running even wilder because I couldn’t see what was happening, and yet I couldn’t turn around. You have to bear it, Yoshin. Or rather, stop it, Yoshin!

The strange interaction between the two sisters continued briefly, but then a dull sound echoed through the air.

“Oooooow!”

“It’s your own fault!”

When I finally turned around, I saw a teary-eyed Saya-chan holding her head while Nanami-san stood with her hand in a fist, an angry expression on her face. I was pretty sure I’d never seen Nanami-san angry before, so I saved the image to my memory. Meanwhile, I was also pretty amazed to see the two sisters acting like this.

When Nanami-san noticed my gaze, she quickly hid her fist behind her back and smiled awkwardly, trying to hide her embarrassment. She really didn’t have to hide it from me.

I seemed to have witnessed a hidden side of her, or perhaps Nanami-san felt more comfortable because she was with her sister. I couldn’t judge for certain, but I for sure didn’t think badly of Nanami-san because of it. I wondered if I would act like that too if I had siblings of my own.

“Heeeeeeey, onee-chan hit me! I only grabbed her boobs and kneaded them a tiny bit!”

That wasn’t “a tiny bit,” was it? I was totally against violence, but she’d kind of brought this one on herself. As Saya-chan extended her arms toward me and came closer, Nanami-san brought her fist out again and assumed another expression of anger. However, just as Saya-chan’s outstretched hands were about to touch me, I grabbed her shoulders and stopped her. Suddenly brought to a halt, Saya-chan tilted her head. Nanami-san did the same.

“Saya-chan, just because you’re the same sex doesn’t mean it isn’t sexual harassment. You have to be careful,” I told her.

“Woow. I was pretty sure you weren’t on my side on this one, but that wasn’t at all what I expected to hear.” Saya-chan sighed, her

smile strained as she stared up at me. Nanami-san was also smiling wryly. I'd only repeated something I'd learned from Baron-san, but I was pretty sure it was true, though that probably wasn't the point in all this.

"Booooo. You're always on onee-chan's side," Saya-chan said.

"Well, of course. I'm her boyfriend, after all. In fact, if I were on your side, we'd have a bigger issue," I said.

"Logic can hurt people too, you know? Boo hoo!" Saya-chan mumbled, slumping over and pretending to cry as she delivered a line as though she were reading a script. When we heard her comment, though, Nanami-san and I looked at each other and laughed. Saya-chan looked at us strangely, but we couldn't help it. This was something only Nanami-san and I knew: that what Saya-chan had said was the same as what Shibetsu-senpai had said to us once. Both of us laughed at the unlikely coincidence. Although Saya-chan looked at us dubiously at first, she, too, ended up laughing.

And the fun we were having passed by in the blink of an eye. By the time we realized it, it was already time for us to head home. It was a shame, but it also couldn't be helped; everything comes to an end eventually. You could even say that we were able to enjoy things *because* we knew they had to end.

"How about we all go camping by the beach when summer hits?" Genichiro-san asked on the way home. "It'll be fun, and you'll get to see Nanami in a swimsuit!"

"The beach?! That sounds great! Onii-chan, be sure to introduce me to that senpai before then, okay?" Saya-chan added.

Didn't you say you disliked camping? I wondered. My parents, however, quickly agreed with the camping idea. In fact, they were already starting to make plans for it. They really did act fast.

The beach, huh? I stole a glance at Nanami-san, who noticed me looking at her. She smiled at me and mouthed, "Camping will be fun, huh?" When she did, however, it was my turn to offer a strained smile.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Oh, uh, actually, this is embarrassing, but...I can't swim," I confessed.

"Oh, wow. Really? Then I'll teach you. I'm pretty good at it." Nanami-san confidently pumped her fist. Afterward, though, she looked up, as though contemplating something. Blushing slightly, she asked in a voice loud enough only for me to hear, "What kind of bathing suits do you like, Yoshin? Do you like bikinis? Maybe you can come with me to buy a new one."

B-Bathing suit?! With that, I immediately pictured her wearing one while at the same time becoming majorly concerned by the

destructive force of such a vision. It was downright preposterous.

“Nanami-san, don’t go anywhere without me at the beach, okay? Oh, and you’ll definitely have to wear a hoodie or something. If you’re gonna take it off, you can only take it off in front of me, okay?”

At my string of requests, Nanami-san looked slightly confused—but then immediately smiled at me softly. “Gosh, my boyfriend’s such a worrywart. Don’t worry; I won’t go anywhere without you.”

“Of course I’m gonna worry. You’re my precious girlfriend.”

We both laughed and continued on our way home as we chatted about things that were to come.

Interlude: The Car Ride Home

On the way home after our trip, I was replaying all the fun memories we'd made together when I glanced at Yoshin, who was sitting next to me. He was nodding off, and seeing him, I had to stifle a yawn myself.

I wasn't bored or anything. I was just feeling relaxed at the thought of going home after such an eventful trip. I suppose all of my exhaustion was hitting me at once. It was hard to believe I was feeling sleepy after all the hours I'd slept.

In the front seats, mom and dad were sharing their thoughts about the day's trip and starting to plan our camping trip in the summer. I didn't really like camping, but if it was going to be like this trip, then maybe I wouldn't mind going at all. That's weird, right? I wondered if my change of heart had something to do with Yoshin being there with me.

Saya wasn't in the car with us this time. She was heading back with Yoshin's parents. Was it just me, or was Saya even more attached to Shinobu-san than I was? Having my sister be so fond of my boyfriend's mother... Now *that* was weird. Shinobu-san, herself, seemed to have taken just as much of a liking to Saya. In fact, what if she liked Saya more than she liked me? I was beginning to feel a little threatened. I guess it was only Saya, though, so nothing weird was going to happen.

I slowly reached for Yoshin's hand. He shifted slightly and let out a soft moan. When I poked his hand a few times out of amusement, his body shuddered each time. *This is kind of fun*, I thought. *No, wait. This isn't the time for that.*

"Hey, mom, do you have a blanket or something? Yoshin seems kind of sleepy." I spoke as quietly as I could, so as not to wake him up. Mom immediately handed me a blanket. I hadn't actually been sure she'd had one, so I was glad I'd asked.

"Why don't you snuggle up to him instead of giving him a blanket? You'd both be so nice and warm," mom said.

"I wouldn't do that!" I cried, snatching the blanket out of her hand. I mean, I suppose I could have, but I'd have felt bad if I had woken him up. When I covered Yoshin with the blanket, he moved slightly, but his eyes remained closed.

It was then that I was struck with a desire to cause a little

mischievous.

I stroked the tip of his nose as if to tickle him, to which Yoshin moaned and shook his head slightly. *Yeah, this is kinda fun... No, wait! What am I doing?*

Looking at his face, I recalled the day I'd confessed my feelings to him. It had all started that day. Today marked three weeks. With our third date over, we only had one more week left. That meant we only had two more dates left to go on, max. The next weekend would be the last challenge—it would be a do-or-die weekend.

I wanted our last date, unlike our most recent one, to be with just the two of us. I had to prepare both mentally and emotionally. It wasn't that our date that day hadn't been fun, but it had felt more like a family trip than an actual date. I never could have expected us all to go on a hot springs trip together.

When I took a moment to tell Hatsumi and Ayumi everything that had happened, they were super surprised. I mean, of course they'd be. They asked me how things had ended up that way, and I had no good response to give them, since it was Shinobu-san's idea and all.

It was really a surprise that Yoshin and I had slept together, but I couldn't bring myself to share *that* with the two of them. I didn't even want to imagine what they'd say to me if I did. My mom hadn't already told them, right? I really hoped she hadn't.

Just then, I heard Yoshin stir next to me. I looked over at him to see him slowly open his eyes. Without saying anything, I kept on watching him, not rushing him or telling him to go back to sleep.

"Sorry, Nanami-san. Was I asleep?" he mumbled.

"Hey there. Just for a little bit. You must've been really tired."

"I guess I'm not used to long car rides," he replied, yawning.

"Sorry. You must've been bored."

"I was watching you sleep, so I wasn't bored at all."

He looked away from me as if trying to hide his embarrassment. His reaction was so adorable, I couldn't help but laugh, which made him blush slightly.

At that moment, we heard mom call to us from the front seat.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you two while you're having a moment, but we're almost there."

Yoshin turned to her, but not being fully awake, he seemed surprised to see her.

Mom had said we were "almost there," but where was "there," exactly? I didn't recognize our surroundings, so I was pretty sure we weren't anywhere close to home. Yoshin looked out the car window, seeming just as confused as I was.

"We're going to stop by Yoshin-kun's house for a little bit. I told his parents it would be causing them too much trouble, but since Saya

is heading back in Shinobu-san's car, I decided to accept their offer," mom explained.

Ah, we're going to Yoshin's house. I hadn't expected that, since we always ended up going to my place. Yoshin seemed just as surprised, but he nodded when he heard mom's explanation.

It had been a really long time since I'd last been to Yoshin's house. The last time must have been when I'd invited myself over to make dinner after our first date. We really did always hang out at my house, huh?

Will I end up going to Yoshin's room when we get there? I wondered. *Not that we'd do anything weird, since everyone else will be there too. I've never been to his room, so I can't help feeling curious. Gosh, who are these excuses even for?* I was getting all worked up all by myself.

Yoshin was doing something on his phone as he sat next to me, but I was too caught up in my delusions to notice at the time. All the same, he suddenly seemed to make up his mind about something. As I sat there all flustered, he touched my hand and whispered, "Nanami-san, I have something important I want to talk to you about. Do you think you could come to my room?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, sure."

His room?! As in, we're gonna be alone in his room? When I asked him that question with my eyes, he nodded at me silently.

With him wearing such a serious expression, I found myself nodding back just by reflex. His touch felt hot and my heart was pounding as anxiety bubbled up inside of me.

Just what did he want to talk about?

Chapter 4: Coming Clean and a Little Anxiety

I'd never felt so sad about an activity involving so many other people coming to a close. To think that someone like me—an introvert who could never wait to be back home and get back to gaming—would feel this way... I still couldn't believe how much I'd changed. I couldn't even recall how many times I'd thought that recently. Whether this change in me was good or bad, I had no idea, but I was going to take the liberty of assuming it was the former. At the very least, it couldn't be a bad thing.

The scene that was unfolding before me was just as much of a new experience. Although I felt a bit nervous, I was doing my best to watch over what was happening.

"Um, is my name good enough?" Nanami-san asked. "Hello, my name is Shichimi. Nice to meet you.' Yoshin, is this okay?"

"Yeah, that'll do just fine. See—everyone's responding," I said.

"Oh, you're right! It's my first time using a chat room like this, but it's not that different from the messaging app I normally use. So these are all your gaming friends, huh?" Nanami-san turned to me, smiling. I was glad she seemed to be enjoying her first interactions online. It was really strange to see Nanami-san playing a game in my room. Yeah, that's right. Nanami-san was in my room. *Nanami-san is in my room.*

I thought that a couple of times, just to make sure I wasn't dreaming, but that simple thought alone made me incredibly nervous. My heart had been pounding nonstop for a while.

This was the very first time Nanami-san had been in my room. The last time she'd visited my house, she'd left without even seeing it. The reason? Of course, I wouldn't have been able to contain myself if she and I were alone in my room together. I was super nervous even now; back then, I wouldn't have been able to cope.

Well, I still wasn't sure I was coping. How can I describe it...? I was fine when we were alone in Nanami-san's room, and I was even okay when we'd stayed in the hotel room, but the sheer fact that we were in *my room* was freaking me out.

"Yoshin, everyone's getting kind of worked up. What should I do?" Nanami-san asked, troubled. With her sudden appearance, even those who didn't normally participate in the chat seemed to be

fighting to get a word in. Some seemed unable to suppress their excitement at the presence of a high school girl. Just what did they think they were doing?

On a side note, Nanami-san was wearing glasses. Apparently, she thought that wearing glasses might put her in a more appropriate mood. The look did seem to fit our situation, and she looked really cute in them. When I told everyone in the chat, though, they got even more excited. Did they like glasses that much? I guess I liked them too, but...

“Let’s let them be until they calm down a bit,” I said.

“Are you sure? Aren’t they the ones who give you advice and stuff?” she asked.

That’s right—I hadn’t invited Nanami-san to my room with anything really graphic in mind. Actually, I’d come clean by confessing that these guys had been helping me out with my dating woes. Nanami-san had seemed really relieved when I’d told her, which was pretty strange. It was as though she’d been terrified I might say something else to her.

She wasn’t the only one who’d been worried though. I’d been absolutely terrified about what she’d say when I told her. When she’d responded with relief, I’d been the one taken aback. I’d asked her if she wanted to chat with them, given that she was already in my room, and Nanami-san had immediately agreed. She’d told me she wanted to thank them for helping me out this whole time. It was just like her to be so thoughtful.

In any case, Nanami-san wasn’t going to be playing; she was just going to chat with my online friends. When I’d asked my teammates whether they were okay with that...

Baron: Yeah, no sweat. We welcome beginners too, plus it’d be great if she took an interest in the game because of this.

Peach: Totally. I’d love to chat with your girlfriend. There’s loads of stuff I wanna ask her.

Layton: The engine of the sugar-making machine is gonna join us? Rad.

There were tons of responses, but at least everyone seemed happy for her to join us. *Hold on a minute. “The engine of the sugar-making machine”? Who said that?*

When I brought it up, some of the others chimed in that I was the fuel. *Wait, I’m the fuel? Shouldn’t Nanami-san be the fuel in this case?* Whatever the case, it was probably best to let it slide. This didn’t seem like the kind of thing I should dig too deep into, though I can’t say I

was convinced by the analogy.

Of course, in regards to the fact that I knew about Nanami-san's dare, everyone had sworn to secrecy, saying that it wasn't their place to interfere. And so, there I was, having gotten the okay from my team, thinking I'd be able to spend time with Nanami-san without any problems. But then...

"Yoshin, dear, I brought some tea and snacks."

"Well, well. I never thought I'd see a girl sitting in my son's room."

Every few minutes, my parents knocked on the door to my room to play host to Nanami-san. My mom and dad were supposed to have left for work again once we'd arrived home, but when I'd told them I was inviting Nanami-san to my room, they'd started putting it off for as long as possible. Genichiro-san was also there.

They did at least knock, and I knew they were doing their best to be hospitable, but didn't they feel like they'd done enough with Nanami-san during the trip? Did all parents get like this when their son brought his first girlfriend home? I mean, since Nanami-san and I weren't doing anything weird, it was fine, but...

"Mom, dad, you already hung out with Nanami-san enough while we were on the trip, didn't you?"

"Having my son's girlfriend over at our house calls for a different kind of attitude, Yoshin," mom replied.

"That's right," dad added. "Just the fact that you are inviting her to your room makes us anxious."

Was he anxious? He didn't look it. Perhaps their frequent visits stemmed from that anxiety. Every time they showed up at my door, Nanami-san smiled and greeted them, though, when I thought about it, I supposed it wasn't like Nanami-san could be rude. Still, Nanami-san's pleasant expression seemed entirely genuine.

I sighed and asked my parents how long they intended to stay. I knew they had work tomorrow, so I figured they couldn't relax for too long. That also meant that I would have to wrap things up before they left.

"Your father and I are planning to leave in about an hour or so, but don't worry about us. You two should make the most of your time together," mom said.

"Oh, thank you!" Nanami-san said, still smiling. "I can't wait to chat with both of you again soon. Shinobu-san, Akira-san, I hope you both have a safe trip."

Hearing her warm comment, my parents trembled with emotion. I had to admit, I knew how they felt. When Nanami-san encouraged you like that, you really felt it in your gut.

"Well then, have a good time, both of you," mom said. "Yoshin,

we'll come to say bye before we leave. While we're gone, don't you even think about doing anything inappropriate to Nanami-san, okay?"

Dad nodded. "Seeing as you didn't do anything when you spent the night together, I'm sure you'll be fine, but I'll say it too: even if you do something, keep it appropriate for high schoolers."

"I know, I know. You two have to get ready, right? Don't worry about us and just get going," I told them.

Once mom and dad had reluctantly left my room, Nanami-san and I resumed our in-game chat. I had the game open on my computer while using my phone to chat. Nanami-san had logged into the chat on her phone.

"It's kind of weird to be chatting through a screen when we're right next to each other, don't you think? But it's kind of fun too," Nanami-san said.

"It does feel a little weird. The fact that you're chatting with my in-game friends is already pretty strange."

I'd never imagined that a day like this would come. In the chat, everyone was posting their greetings.

Baron: It's nice to meet you, Shichimi-san. I'm Baron, the team leader. I've heard a lot about you already.

Peach: Hi, Shichimi-san. I'm Peach. I'm one of Canyon-san's game friends. It's very nice to meet you.

After Baron-san and Peach-san, everyone else followed suit with the introductions. Nanami-san read each one of them, responding politely to each. She really was so conscientious.

Just so we're clear, "Shichimi" was Nanami-san's online handle. At first, she hadn't been sure what to use, but she'd eventually settled on Shichimi by altering the reading of the first kanji of her name.

"Your name here is Canyon, huh? I guess I should call you Canyon-kun while we're on here," she said.

"I'm calling you Shichimi-san, so I guess that works."

"But then that'd be the same as always. How about we do the opposite in the game, and you call me just by my name without any honorifics?"

"You mean I should try calling you 'Shichimi'? Doesn't that make it seem like I'm getting all full of myself just because I got a girlfriend?"

"Who cares? Come on, just try it."

She brought her hands together and pleaded adorably, but for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to do it. Even though I wasn't

even going to be saying it out loud, I still felt an aversion to the idea.

Canyon: Shichimi-san is sitting next to me, watching us play, so I hope you don't mind that she'll just be on the chat today.

Baron: Wait. Don't tell me you invited her to join us and you're still using honorifics. Shouldn't you be dropping the "san"?

In response to Baron-san's teasing message, Nanami-san and I looked at each other. He couldn't hear our conversation, could he? His timing felt too spot-on.

"Baron-san is such a good person! Come on, Yoshin! Call me by my name!" Nanami-san exclaimed.

Piggybacking off of Baron-san's comment, Nanami-san closed in on me gleefully. If she was having fun, it was fine, I supposed. While Nanami-san continued getting excited over the chat, I displayed the game on my monitor.

"This is the game you play with everyone? It's so pretty. There are loads of cute characters too. I've never seen a game like this before. Oh, it's the girl from your icon!"

Nanami-san poked her head out from behind me and brought her face close to mine. We stared at the screen together, my heart beating faster at the sweet smell drifting from her direction. I went through the interface with her, showing her the various windows and battle modes. There was no particular event going on, so each member of the team was playing however they most felt inclined.

Every time I did something, Nanami-san nodded with understanding or raised her voice in admiration. Maybe everything she saw was fresh and intriguing for her because she'd never really played video games before.

Baron: Even though Canyon-kun's been keeping us updated, it's hard to believe things between the two of you have progressed so quickly. I'm amazed by the whole thing.

The others quickly agreed.

Shichimi: That's because everyone gave him such helpful advice. Canyon-kun told me how much you all support him. I really appreciate it.

Baron: Oh, no. This is all down to the efforts the two of you made. We were just riding the excitement

of a high school romance. We should be thanking you, really.

With everyone opening up to Nanami-san, the conversation was becoming more lively. As the chat became filled with compliments, I became less and less able to participate. It was like watching myself get roasted, except everyone was saying nice things rather than being mean.

Baron: Hm? Canyon-kun's a little quieter than usual. Is something wrong?

Shichimi: Oh, he's just sitting next to me, all embarrassed. He really is so adorable.

Why would you say that to them?!

The members of the chat were now unable to withhold their excitement and were typing things like "Stop getting all embarrassed!" and "I never thought I'd hear that IRL."

Shichimi: Come to think of it, I heard that when he first told me he really liked me, it was because of all the encouragement you gave him. I was really glad.

Baron: Oh, that wasn't really us as a group—that was more the fruit of Peach-chan's labor. She told him that he had to take the initiative and tell you, though I have to admit she kicked some sense into me too.

Peach: I wish you'd kept that to yourself, Baron-san...

Shichimi: Is that true?! Thank you so much, Peach-san! Thanks to you, we've made such amazing memories together!

Peach: No, I mean... I'm glad if that made you happy, I guess.

After that, Nanami-san continued to express her gratitude to Peach-san. Peach-san's responses seemed a little stilted—perhaps she was thinking back to how distrustful she'd been of Nanami-san toward the beginning of our relationship. Thinking back myself, I was overcome by a belated wave of embarrassment. That was why I, too, decided to express my thanks to Peach-san.

Canyon: Peach-san, I really should thank you again

too. Because of you, I was able to understand the importance of saying how I feel.

Peach: I'm genuinely happy to hear that, Canyon-san. I wish you both all the happiness in the world.

Shichimi: Thank you! We'll definitely live happily ever after!

From then on, Nanami-san and Peach-san launched into full-on girl talk. Seeing them get along so well warmed my heart, but then I saw an invitation to a separate chat room. There, more messages came pouring in...

Baron: Wow, a conversation between two girls... Nice. There's something so beautiful about it, even though it's just text. Is it just me, or is it sparkling?

Flora: Peach-san is in middle school, right? I feel like this conversation is breathing new life into me. What a sight for sore eyes. Give me more!

Alpha: We've gotta save this chat log forever. I'm gonna screenshot it too. I'm glad that we weren't doing voice chat.

It was a spectator chat for watching the girl talk between Nanami-san and Peach-san. Funnily enough, I knew exactly how they felt. I wanted to watch them too and not get in the way, given how nice it was that they were talking with each other. It really was a sweet conversation, but somehow...

I didn't know what it was, but something didn't sit right with me. I knew I was happy to see them getting along so well, and yet, something dark stirred inside my chest.

"Yoshin, Peach-chan is super cute! She's so lovely!"

Before I knew it, Nanami-san was calling Peach-san "Peach-chan" in both chat and real life. I was happy to see her smile like that, but I couldn't take it anymore. The next thing I knew, I was pinching a corner of her sleeve.

"Yoshin?" Nanami-san asked, tilting her head and putting her index finger on her cheek. When I heard her say my name, I snapped back to reality and quickly let go. *Why did I just do that? No, I don't even need to ask. I'm jealous.*

As I sat there telling myself how lame I was, Nanami-san smiled at me and sent Peach-san a message.

Shichimi: I'm sorry, Peach-chan. Canyon-kun is

sulking because I wasn't paying any enough attention to him. I'm gonna go coddle him for a bit. I look forward to talking with everyone again soon!

Peach: Oh dear, I should've been more mindful. In that case, I'll give you back to him, Shichimi-chan.

"Nanami-san?!" I shouted when I saw Nanami-san's message, but too late—the chat had exploded with excitement. On a side note, I was surprised to see that Peach-san was calling Nanami-san with a "chan" too.

Nanami-san placed her phone on my desk and sat down on my bed. "Of course you'd feel lonely if I kept looking at my phone when we were alone together in your room."

"I mean, I wouldn't say I was lonely."

"Then who exactly tugged on my clothes earlier, hm?"

Nanami-san's smile was brimming with affection, but I had no doubt she was teasing me. Having realized my jealousy, I couldn't say anything back. I raised both of my hands in surrender and sat down beside her.

"Okay, I confess. It was great seeing the two of you getting along, but I was starting to feel a bit jealous."

"Then we should commemorate today as your Jealousy Day. Is it bad that I'm happy you got all jealous?"

"I guess I've made you jealous before too, back when I called Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san by their first names and again when I first called your sister 'Saya-chan.' Maybe we can call it even."

"Aha ha, that did happen, huh? It's been, like, three weeks since then, so it wasn't that long ago."

Three weeks... When I thought about it, three weeks was both long and short. In just one more week, it would be a month, and our one-month anniversary would be here. Perhaps Nanami-san was thinking the same thing, as a silence settled between us. Nanami-san was the first to break it.

"Hey, can you call me by my name?"

Her question was sudden, but instead of being surprised by it, I looked at her without saying anything.

Call her by her name, huh? I'd never really called anyone by their name before. No one I could remember, anyway. I'd always respectfully tacked "kun" onto boys' names and used "san" for girls. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd called someone just by their name, but recently, it felt like Nanami-san was putting a lot of pressure on me to call her by her name. Was there a reason?

"You seem really intent on it. Do you not like it when I call you Nanami-san?"

“It’s not that I dislike it. It’s just...sometimes I feel like there’s a wall between us, and it makes me feel kind of lonely.”

A wall between us, huh? I hadn’t meant to put up a wall like that, but maybe I’d been doing it unintentionally.

Why did I have such an aversion to calling her by her name? I inched closer to Nanami-san and tried to say her name, but, well, when I tried to do so, I felt my body temperature drop and the tips of my fingers grow cold.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. It was all I could say, and my response seemed to shock her. Her eyebrows tilted downward, and her lips drooped with sadness. I didn’t want to be the one to push her to make that face, but I also couldn’t bring myself to say anything.

What’s going on? Why can’t I do it? I felt angry with myself.

“No, it’s fine,” Nanami-san murmured, her voice trembling. I didn’t know what I could do for her as she simply sat there, shaking. I reached out to touch her, but she withdrew her hand. It seemed that added even more to the shock she felt. A single tear fell down her cheek.

Seeing her start to cry like that, I began to feel shocked myself. *What am I doing, making my girlfriend cry? It should be easy to call her that, right? I can do it, can’t I? I could before. Wait, “before”?*

Just then, I felt myself starting to remember something.

“Yoshin, what are you doing?”

The moment I heard my mom’s voice, whatever had been taking shape in my mind dissipated in an instant. My mom and my dad, who were standing in the doorway, saw Nanami-san crying on my bed and me sitting next to her, and looked at me with sober eyes. My mom opened her mouth again and spoke to me in an eerily calm voice.

“Yoshin, what exactly are you doing on the bed? If you’re trying to force her to do something...”

She seemed slightly angry as she stared at me, frowning in thought. My father said nothing, his face fixed in a tight smile.

The door to my room was built well. Because of that, if it wasn’t locked from the inside, it didn’t make any noise when it was opened. It opened smoothly, without the slightest sound. That meant that, unless there was a knock first—or if I was focused on something, even if there was a knock—I wouldn’t notice the door being opened. That was why I expressed a classic request rather than try to explain the situation.

“Mom, dad, I’d really appreciate it if you could at least knock before you walk into my room,” I said.

I could imagine their response already, but in order to calmly display that I wasn’t guilty of doing anything inappropriate, I acted as confident as possible.



“I did knock. You didn’t answer, so I wondered what happened, and then I saw Nanami-san nearly in tears. What did you do?” mom asked.

“Shinobu-san, this... It’s nothing,” Nanami-san replied, looking back and forth between me and my mom. It seemed she was finally starting to grasp the situation. “It’s nothing bad. I just got something in my eye.”

Nanami-san shifted away from me slightly as she gave her unlikely explanation. Her voice sounded so sad; it was pretty clear that *something* had happened.

“I see. In that case, I won’t press further. But, Yoshin, I did tell you before that if you make Nanami-san cry, I won’t forgive you,” mom said in a deliberately calm manner. It was true—she had told me that. She wasn’t going to pry into what had happened, but she already knew I’d made Nanami-san sad.

Both my parents had serious looks on their faces. If they were going to scold me, then I was willing to take it, though it would be embarrassing to do so in front of Nanami-san.

“Yeah, I remember,” I said simply, preparing myself for what was to come. I heard Nanami-san draw in a breath, but she didn’t say anything more. I simply waited for my mom to speak, but what came out of her mouth was not something I was expecting.

“Not making Nanami-san cry also means you shouldn’t go through anything to make yourself cry either. I want you to remember that. If you’re sad, Nanami-san will be sad too,” she said, and with that, my mom left the room.

I’d been pretty certain she was going to give me an earful, so now I felt oddly let down. What did she mean, “if I’m sad”? As I sat there wondering, my dad—who’d been watching my mom walk away—turned to me and said quietly, “Yoshin, I’m not sure if what your mother said is applicable to this situation, but if you’re sitting there looking like you’re about to cry, I’m sure that that would make Nanami-san sad too.”

“What?”

I brought my hand up to my cheek. Did I look like I was about to start crying? I would have thought I looked pissed, given how angry I felt with myself.

I looked over at Nanami-san, who gave me a quiet nod. Apparently, she also thought I looked as though I were about to cry. While I remained confused, my dad continued.

“It’s probably not my place to say anything, but you two should talk it over. The most important thing to do after a fight is to make up. Your mother and I have gone through many, many fights to get to

where we are today.”

“You and mom fight? I’ve never seen that,” I said.

“Well, your mother is a lot more passionate than she looks. I have a more laid-back approach to things, so we sure used to end up arguing a lot. Once, when we went to the beach...”

Just as I was thinking that it was rare for my dad to talk about stuff like this, my mom appeared behind him. She hadn’t even made a sound. When my dad felt a hand on his shoulder all of a sudden, he let out a silent scream. Nanami-san and I freaked out too, seeing only a disembodied hand appear on dad’s shoulder.

“Dear, just what exactly are you telling our son? How about we have a little chat between husband and wife?”

Like something from a horror film, my mom slowly poked her head out from behind my dad’s shoulder. She had a smile on her face, but it was a frightful smile. My dad, too, managed to force a smile. He didn’t even bother to explain himself; he’d already given up.

Wait, mom—why did you come back again, anyway?

“I came to retrieve your father because we should be heading out pretty soon. Also, everyone else is leaving, so I came to get Nanami-san,” my mom explained, reading my mind.

“Ah, I see. You’re leaving, huh? Then I won’t see you until next week. But, mom, don’t you think you should let go of dad already?” I asked.

“True... Well then, Yoshin, we’ll see you next week. I’m sure that now that you have Nanami-san, you won’t be lonely anymore. Regardless, be good to each other, okay?”

Mom acted like it was only me that felt lonely, but yeah, I suppose it was true. I admit it. Even though I’d never really come out and said it, it was true that I felt lonely because my parents were gone so frequently. But did she really have to say that in front of Nanami-san?

Nanami-san and I stood around chatting with my parents just a little bit longer. We talked about nothing in particular, but they entrusted me to Nanami-san’s care until their return the following week. After tonight, I wouldn’t see them again until next week, just before my and Nanami-san’s one-month anniversary. Just thinking about it made me nervous.

Perhaps sensing my change in mood, dad turned to me to give me one final piece of advice. “Yoshin, as a father, but also as a man, I’ll say this: I want you to remember to always be considerate of Nanami-san. When something happens, it’s almost always the woman who ends up getting hurt. I know this might be an old-fashioned way of thinking, but for as long as you’re a student, I want you to always think about your actions and the consequences of those actions.”

It was the very first time I’d heard something like that from my

dad. In my family, we'd never had any reason to talk about things related to relationships. Maybe he'd only thought to say this to me because I had a girlfriend now, and he and my mom had seen Nanami-san crying.

"I promise, but I'll make sure not to get us into a situation where we have to worry about that at all. I mean, you know how much of a wimp I am, don't you, dad?"

"Well, I know you're my son, but you're also Shinobu-san's son too. It's not that I don't trust you, but I thought I'd mention it. Besides, you'll be surprised at your ability to act when the time comes."

My dad and I both laughed, and then I raised my pinky toward him. He was surprised at first, but he returned the favor, and we did a pinky swear for the first time since I was a kid.

"It's kinda embarrassing doing this as a high schooler," I said.

"What are you saying? To us, you'll always be our little kid."

Was that how it was? My dad and I let go of each other's pinkies and laughed. Nanami-san and my mom were also talking and laughing. Thanks to both my mom and my dad, the heavy emotions I'd felt earlier had vanished completely.

After that, Nanami-san got ready to head home with her family, while my parents headed off on their business trip.

"I'll call you when I get home," Nanami-san said to me as she left. And finally, I was left alone.

"Well then...I think I'll go back to my room."

I headed to my room by myself. In the chat, my teammates were busy gossiping about what Nanami-san and I might be up to now that we'd gone quiet. Since one of them was a middle schooler, they weren't proposing anything crazy—they were mostly guessing at the various ways we might be flirting with each other.

While everyone else was chattering away, I invited Baron-san to a private chat. Without letting the others know about it, he accepted, and we began our own conversation.

Canyon: Baron-san, can I ask you about something?

Baron: What's going on? You sound so serious all of a sudden. Is it something you can't talk about with the others?

Before then, I'd always chatted about relationship-related things in the general chat where everyone could see, so it was possibly my first time talking alone with Baron-san. He didn't seem to mind though; he'd readily accepted my request.

Canyon: In a way, I guess. Actually, it's about that

comment earlier about calling Nanami-san just by her name.

Baron: Just by her name? I was just joking about that, so you really don't have to worry.

Canyon: Well, actually, she's been asking me to do that for a while now.

Baron: Oh, really? What a coincidence. I didn't realize.

I should've known, but it really was just a coincidence, huh? He certainly had interesting timing.

I told Baron-san the gist of the story and also about how I was struggling to drop the honorific. I knew that this was something I needed to resolve myself, but for the first time, I didn't feel like I could. That was why I wanted to get Baron-san's opinion—to see if he'd be able to give me some kind of a hint to resolving this. I know it sounds kind of pathetic, but that was all I could do.

Once Baron-san had read my explanation, he stopped replying for a moment. As I sat there feeling anxious, I saw him resume typing.

Baron: An aversion to calling her by her name, huh? I remember feeling that way too. It's scary, isn't it? I wonder if I can try to figure out when I first called my wife by her name.

Canyon: Were you scared too, Baron-san?

Baron: Of course. I fretted over it quite a bit, actually. What if I called her that and she disliked me for it? What if she thought I was being creepy? I still don't think I'm comfortable with dropping honorifics with just anyone.

It was true that Baron-san called me "Canyon-kun," and he called Peach-san "Peach-chan." To be honest, I was pretty glad to learn I wasn't the only one who felt this way. I couldn't help but wonder if Baron-san called his wife by her given name alone. Judging from what he'd said, it sure seemed that way.

Baron: But you don't have to call her that if you don't feel comfortable with the idea. I mean, I don't think Shichimi-san would hate you for it. Besides, whether or not you use honorifics to address someone doesn't really affect how much you love them, does it?

I appreciated him saying that to me, but having seen the heartbroken expression on Nanami-san's face, I wasn't quite able to agree with him. While reading through Baron-san's advice, I kept trying to think of a way through it. Baron-san himself listened to me earnestly as he tried to think of a solution.

Canyon: When I try to address her casually, the tips of my fingers grow all cold, and I can't bring myself to say anything. What's that all about?

Baron: I'm no expert, so it might be irresponsible for me to say this, but maybe there's some past trauma involved here. Maybe something from elementary school—something you don't remember.

Canyon: Past trauma?

Baron: Yeah. I've dealt with something like that too. Even if it seems like something silly, something small might be having a lasting effect.

Elementary school, huh? I couldn't really remember, but I had sounded rather cold back when Nanami-san had mentioned elementary school. I wondered if something had happened back then that was still affecting me now. Perhaps remembering that incident would somehow lead to a solution.

Baron: Canyon-kun, I think it's best not to force yourself to remember anything. You might be better off just relaxing and taking it easy.

Canyon: Thanks, Baron-san, but I really do want to resolve this. I can't sit here doing nothing after I made her all sad.

Baron: I see. In that case, I'll be sending you good vibes so that things go well.

Canyon: Thanks a lot.

For now, I had a clearer idea of my next step. As I moved to close the chat, Baron-san sent me one final message. It was a very curious one.

Baron: Was the reason your girlfriend started crying really because you wouldn't call her by her name?

Those final words from him refused to leave my mind.

Interlude: My Confession

Once I got home, I changed into my loungewear and lay down on my bed. Both fun memories and not-so-fun memories swirled around my head.

“Today was so much fun,” I muttered to myself. “The trip was nice too, and just playing games together at home was pretty neat too.”

To be precise, it wasn’t playing games together that had been fun—I’d just been happy to be so close to Yoshin as we both did the same thing. I’d only been watching him play.

I wondered if Yoshin was satisfied with that too. I hoped he was. I still hadn’t managed to call him though. Now that I was alone, I was overcome with guilt about what I’d done to him. I’d been able to wipe some of that feeling away thanks to Yoshin’s parents, but getting rid of it completely was another matter.

I glanced unthinkingly at my phone. There, I saw a photo of the two of us, as well as the icon for the chat app I’d installed earlier that day.

I looked closer at the icon. I’d never imagined I would one day install an app like this. Although we’d only met through text, I could already tell that Baron-san, the guy Yoshin had been getting advice from, was a mature man. Peach-chan seemed totally adorable, and everyone else was nice too. Did he interact with me so sincerely because he’d been talking to people like them? Or was that more to do with Yoshin’s personality? In any case, it was no use thinking about it. The fact that Yoshin and his friends were all kind people was good enough for me. I was glad I’d been able to thank everyone too.

More importantly, I hadn’t realized just how much of an aversion Yoshin had to calling people by their names. When I thought back on our interaction earlier, I kicked my feet violently, my body writhing with self-hatred. I knew my mom might tell me to quiet down, but I couldn’t worry about that at the moment.

I wanted Yoshin to call me by name because I’d been feeling like there was still a wall between us. I never thought for one second that Yoshin would look so pained trying to drop an honorific. I’d felt so pathetic when I’d realized I was being so cruel to him. That was the real reason I’d started crying. It was also wrong of me to have let Yoshin see me crying, but I wasn’t the best at controlling my

emotions.

When I thought about what I'd done, I couldn't sit still. I just felt like I had to move and do something, whatever that something was.

I knew I'd only just left Yoshin's house, but I immediately wanted to see him again. I couldn't, of course, since it was nighttime. Also, I wasn't sure if it was a good idea to see him at all while I was feeling this way. That's how I felt, anyway. Being me, though, I probably wouldn't be able to do anything, even if I did get to see him.

"People are so greedy. Spending time together is enough, but we just want more and more. I wonder if something happened that made Yoshin struggle like this," I ended up muttering to myself.

With that in mind, I began to wonder if me calling him might be a bother. Such a pessimistic thought was unusual for me. *Maybe I should just go to sleep*, I thought.

As I sat there pondering what to do, an unfamiliar notification appeared on my phone. The message read:

New invite from Peach-san.

Of course the notification was unfamiliar: it was from the app I'd installed earlier that day. There was a small "1" displayed at the corner of the icon, so there was no mistaking it.

"Huh? Peach-chan?"

Peach-chan was the girl I'd made friends with today when I'd met Yoshin's online friends. When I tapped on the app, a slightly different message was displayed.

Peach-san has invited you to a chat. Would you like to participate?

A chat... The one from earlier had been so lively with everyone there. It seemed Peach-chan had invited me to one.

On the screen there were two buttons: "Accept" and "Decline." I tapped "Accept." The format seemed similar enough to the group-chat function on my other messaging app.

The only two participants in the chat were me and Peach-chan. I started feeling kind of nervous.

Peach: Good evening, Shichimi-chan. Sorry to disturb you so late. Are you alone right now? Is it okay if we talk?

Shichimi: Hey, Peach-chan. Yup, I'm by myself. It's totally fine. What's up? I'm happy to chat with you anytime, but it feels a little different when it's

just the two of us, huh?

Peach-chan was a very cute girl...I assumed. The way she said things was so adorable, but it didn't seem like she was putting on an act or anything. I'd only interacted with her through text, but to me, she seemed totally genuine. That was why I'd proposed that we call each other with "chan" attached to our names. Peach-chan had seemed reluctant at first, but in the end, she'd accepted.

Peach: Isn't Canyon-san with you? You're dating, so I thought he might be in your room with you. Oh, I didn't even think! I'm sorry. I must be intruding!

Shichimi: No, no, no, we're not together! It's way too soon for us to be together at this time of night! I'm already home. Oh, did you want to talk with him? Do you want to invite him to the chat?

Peach-chan sure came up with wild ideas. Of course he wouldn't be here at this time of night... Well, maybe other people were different, but it was far too early in our relationship for us to be doing that. However, if she was concerned about whether Yoshin was around, maybe she wanted to talk with him about something...

Peach: Oh, no. Actually, I wanted to chat with you, Shichimi-chan, so it's totally fine.

It seemed obvious when I thought about it, given that I was the one she'd invited to the chat. We'd talked a lot earlier, though. Had something happened? I did feel like talking with someone myself, though, so maybe this worked out perfectly.

I debated whether I should let Yoshin know later that I talked with her. I wouldn't tell him what we talked about, but I bet he'd be surprised. Maybe he'd get a little jealous again too.

It seemed kind of jerkish to try to make him jealous, though. After all, it was only a chat between two girls. *Maybe I'll just tell him if something happens.*

That was what I was thinking, anyway, but the conversation we were about to have would end up as a secret between Peach-chan and me.

Peach: Thank you so much for today, Shichimi-chan. There aren't any other girls my age on the team, so I suddenly felt like I had an older sister. It was loads of fun.

Shichimi: I had fun too! I have a younger sister, but you're very different. You're in middle school, right?

Peach: Yeah, I'm in eighth grade.

In that case, she was roughly the same age as Saya. If Saya was the active, sporty type, then Peach-chan seemed more like the quiet bookworm. I knew I only had text to go on, but that was the impression she gave off. *I bet she's really cute too.*

Peach: I actually had something I wanted to tell you, Shichimi-chan, but it was hard to bring up with Canyon-san around. That's why I ended up messaging you so late in the evening.

Shichimi: Hard to bring up? I'm fine in terms of the time, but are you okay?

Peach: I'm sneaking my phone under the covers in bed. My mom and dad are already asleep, so I feel like I'm doing something bad... I've been doing this a lot lately though, so I'm okay.

Everything she said was so cute. I smiled, wondering if there'd been once a time when I'd been like this too. If she was feeling like she was doing something bad, though, I wondered if I should tell her that everything was okay. Meanwhile, Peach-chan continued typing.

Peach: Actually, I messaged you because I wanted to apologize.

Apologize? She had nothing to apologize for. If *I* had done something rude, then I should be the one apologizing. I mean, had she ever done anything to me? As I struggled to come up with a logical explanation, Peach-chan hit me with a bombshell.

Peach: At the beginning, I was the one person who was against Canyon-san going out with you. In fact, I even told him he should break up with you.

From our chat earlier, I couldn't even imagine that she'd been thinking something like that at all. I was so shocked by her confession, my hands froze for a moment, but at the same time, I felt ashamed for having made such an adorable person apologize to me.

Even though she didn't know, the concerns she felt were probably accurate. With slightly trembling hands, I typed her a question.

Shichimi: What did Canyon-kun say when he was talking with everyone?

Peach: He told us a gyaru had confessed to him. I... I knew that Canyon-san was a serious and quiet person—or at least that's how I pictured him—so I thought he was just being messed around with. That was why I was so against him going out with you.

I felt my chest tighten. Peach-chan clearly cared for Yoshin, which was no doubt why she'd opposed him dating me, and she wanted to give a genuine apology. This had to mean...

Shichimi: Hey, Peach-chan, you said you were against it, right? Does that mean you feel differently now?

Peach: Yes, that's right. Don't worry. I'm rooting for you both now.

Shichimi: I should have known. I mean, if that weren't the case, you wouldn't have told him he needed to tell me how he felt, right?

Peach: Yeah. Every single day, Canyon-san would get so excited telling us about the time he was spending with you. When he talked about the dates you went on, it was clear right away just how much you cared about each other. That's why I decided that I needed to support you both.

I knew it... Once I heard that, I knew. I knew how Peach-chan felt. I probably wasn't wrong about this. I really was the one who needed to apologize.

Peach: That's why I was so happy to get to talk with you today. At the same time, I was ashamed of myself for opposing your relationship because of my silly assumptions. That feeling just kept growing, so I just wanted to say I'm sorry.

Seeing the pause in our messages, I started thinking about various things as well. When I thought about how she must be feeling—and the fact that the girl who felt like that was so friendly toward me and had gathered up all her courage to apologize to me like this—my heart ached.

Peach: I'm sorry. I know that telling you this was

self-serving and selfish of me, and I must have troubled you, even though you've been so sweet to me.

Shichimi: Hey, Peach-chan, can I ask you something?

Peach: What is it? Sure, if it's something I can answer.

Shichimi: I'm sorry if I'm wrong, but... Could it be that you liked Canyon-kun, by any chance?

For a brief moment, Peach-chan didn't respond. I felt like the pause itself was enough of a response to my question. And, after some time had passed, she typed in her reply.

Peach: I'm sorry. You're right. I liked Canyon-san. I didn't know his real name, what he looked like, or where he lived, but I liked him.

Seeing her message, I regretted asking her so unfairly. Peach-chan had no reason to apologize to me. With text alone, it was hard for me to convey feelings and small nuances to her, as it was hard for me to pick them up from her too. I had no intention of criticizing her, but if my question had had that effect, then that was certainly not how I wanted to repay her for gathering up her courage. In fact, what I wanted to say was entirely different.

Wait a minute, I thought. Does this app allow voice chats too?

When I looked at the settings on the app, I saw that it had a feature that allowed you to chat by voice with the other person. I hesitated a bit but ultimately decided that this was the best way for me to properly convey my feelings.

I felt a very different kind of nervousness from when I would call Yoshin. My nerves must have been nothing, though, compared to how Peach-chan must have been feeling, so I mustered up the courage to ask.

Shichimi: Hey, Peach-chan, I was wondering...would it be possible to talk by voice chat instead of text? I feel like I really want to talk to you.

Peach: Huh? You want to call me?

Shichimi: Yeah. Sorry, I know it's kind of late. Would that be okay?

Peach: Yes, it's fine. I'd like to talk with you too.

I'd been worried Peach-chan might refuse, but she ended up

agreeing to my proposal. That was how, for the first time in my life, I ended up talking with a younger girl whose face or name I didn't even know.

"Hello, Peach-chan. It's so nice to get to talk with you like this. It's Shichimi," I said into the phone.

"Y-You too," came a hesitant reply. "I'm Peach. Um, Shichimi...-chan?"

"You don't have to say it like a question," I said, laughing. "Don't worry—you can use '-chan.'"

Even as I felt nervous about doing this for the first time, I listened attentively to Peach-chan's voice. She seemed nervous as well; her voice was trembling slightly. In order to avoid making her feel even more anxious, I did my best to make my voice sound as gentle as possible.

But wow, seriously, Peach-chan's voice is so cute, I thought. I felt like I could listen to her all night. She spoke quietly, in a comforting almost-whisper. It was a kind of voice I could never produce.

For a moment, I wallowed in my admiration of just how cute she was, but I had to set those feelings aside for the time being or else I wouldn't be able to carry on this conversation. That would miss the entire point. In any event, I was the one who'd suggested we chat. I had to get hold of myself.

Since we were already committed, I managed, even while struggling, to start talking to her. It seemed that Yoshin hadn't ever called her either—this was Peach-chan's first time too.

"Sorry to call you all of a sudden. I felt like I wasn't getting my feelings across by text, so I wanted to talk to you like this instead," I told her.

"N-Not at all," she replied. "I'm actually glad I get to hear your voice. You have a lovely voice. It sounds so clear, like glass."

Hearing such a poetic and beautiful description used to refer to my own voice, I couldn't help but blush. I'd never been complimented like that for my voice before.

"What are you saying? Your voice is super cute too! I'm jealous. If my voice is like glass, then what would yours be? Hmm... Ugh, I'm sorry. I can't think of a good way to say it. It's like you're whispering...like a bell, maybe? Anyway, it's really pretty!"

"Oh, gosh, no. It's not like that at all. No one's ever told me that before."

Complimenting each other seemed to have eased the tension, because we both started laughing softly. Since Peach-chan was in bed and getting ready to go to sleep, she probably had to keep quiet. Even so, her laughter was cute.

After we'd both laughed a bit, a brief silence settled between us. I

took the opportunity to bring up what I'd asked earlier.

"So, Peach-chan, you liked Yo—Canyon-kun, huh?"

I almost said Yoshin's real name out of habit, but I managed to stop myself and used his online handle instead.

"I'm sorry. I know I'm only causing trouble by telling you this," Peach-chan said.

"Don't apologize. I'm not troubled at all. In fact, I respect you. I think you're amazing."

"Respect? No way. That's not something to say about someone like me."

"*Someone like me.*" The way she said that reminded me of the things Yoshin used to say when we'd first started dating. Maybe Yoshin and Peach-chan were similar in a way, and that was why Peach-chan had been attracted to him. Somehow, I couldn't help feeling bad about coming between them.

"I do respect you. I mean, to watch the boy you like get a girlfriend, and then to still be able to root for them... I couldn't possibly do that. You're a kind and adorable person—a girl I admire."

"You're not angry? Even though I liked your boyfriend and was against the two of you dating?"

"There's nothing for me to be angry about. I mean, if I were in your position, I'd have been against it too. If I'd learned that someone had asked out the guy I liked, I would probably have been super jealous. That's a completely natural response."

"Thanks, Shichimi-chan. Now I feel like I understand why Canyon-san fell for you."

I could sense both relief and kindness in Peach-chan's reply. At the same time, though, I felt a small pinprick in my heart.

"Peach-chan, you know things about Canyon-kun that I don't know, right? I'd love it if you'd tell me more about him. What's he like in game?" I asked.

"Well, let's see... I, um, don't really have any friends at school, so I spend a lot of time by myself. That's when I started playing games on my phone."

I wondered if that was one of the things she had in common with Yoshin. Before, I'd only known Yoshin by name, and he hadn't really stood out in class either. I don't think I'd ever seen him hanging out with any other students.

"That was how I met Canyon-san. I didn't like him right away or anything like that. I just thought the things he said were kind of similar to the things I would say."

"Similar, huh? I think I get what you mean. Maybe it's because you're both on the quieter side."

"Actually, a big difference between the two of us was that while I

found not having many friends at school painful, Canyon-san didn't seem to have an issue at all."

"He didn't think not having friends was an issue?"

Peach-chan's comment intrigued me. She went on to tell me what Yoshin had said to her at the time.

"Right. He told me I didn't have to force myself to make friends at school—that I could still make plenty of friends in-game and in other environments. He said there wasn't any need to be bothered by not having many friends and that he thought about me as his friend."

"Ah. That does sound like something he would say."

I'd never really seen that side of him before, but I could very easily imagine him saying something like that. I couldn't help chuckling at the thought. Peach-chan laughed too and then continued.

"I don't think he thought much about what he'd said, but I felt like he'd somehow saved me. I felt like he was telling me everything was okay even though I didn't have many friends at my middle school and had a difficult time hanging out with people."

"And that was how you came to like him."

Peach-chan, who'd paused in her story, took a deep breath before baring her heart to me. Doing so must have taken so much courage, and yet, she still shared it with me.

"That's what started it, yes. After that, I kept getting drawn to the things he said. It got more and more fun to talk with him in the chat. My time at school became less of a burden because of what he'd said to me, and by the time I realized it, I already liked him."

The way she spoke, as though embarrassed, was adorable, but in the next moment, she began to sound uneasy.

"It's weird, right? I felt like I'd been saved by some offhand remark of his. I didn't know anything about him—what he looked like, his name, or even where he lived. I didn't even know if he was actually a boy. But even still, I ended up falling for him."

Her words, full of unease, combined with her pretty voice and nearly disappeared into thin air, so I replied to her immediately. She had to know how I felt.

"It's not weird."

That's right—there was nothing weird about her. There was absolutely nothing strange about liking someone, even when you didn't know anything about them.

"It's not weird at all," I continued. "Even if you don't know anything about them, there's nothing weird about liking someone."

Even in his games, Yoshin remained himself. That was why I couldn't claim it was weird for her to like him. I couldn't even think that, because *I* was like that too. This girl was only in middle school, and yet she had a more mature way of thinking than I did. If she was

willing to open up to me like this, then it was only fair for me to open up to her as well.

I took a deep breath, just like she had. I hadn't even told Yoshin what I was about to tell her. Maybe Peach-chan would dislike me once I told her this, but even so, I wanted to say this honestly, at least to her.

"Actually, Peach-chan, I only started liking Canyon-kun after I confessed to him. I started liking him after we started going out...when he didn't even know anything about what was going on."

I heard Peach-chan draw in her breath. Had I shocked her? But in order to respond to her earlier sentiments, I began to share my secret—a secret I hadn't even shared with him.

"Will you hear me out? I didn't confess to Canyon-kun because I liked him. It actually happened in the opposite order. I confessed to him first, and then I started liking him. The reason I confessed to him was... Well, it was because of a dare. It was all a lie," I said.

Peach-chan listened in silence as I confessed things that should've made her despise me. I didn't know how she would react. I started sweating out of nervousness. Eventually, her next words broke the silence that seemed to have gone on forever.

"What? Why... Why would you tell me something like that?! What would you do if I told Canyon-san what you just told me?!" she asked, her voice quivering so much, she had barely managed to speak.

She was right—that was a possibility. But my want for me and Peach-chan—two girls who'd ended up liking the same person—to be able to talk with each other sincerely was much greater than my worry about that possibility.

"Just like how you were honest with me, I wanted to be honest with you too. It would be rude if I didn't. I mean, it really was my fault. That's why I don't want you to worry about what you felt toward me or about the fact that you were against our relationship. The one who should be apologizing is me."

I paused for a moment and then straightened my posture. I knew she couldn't see me, but what mattered here was my own feelings.

"I'm sorry, Peach-chan," I said.

"Shichimi-chan..."

Her voice was trembling, and I could tell that she was crying. I felt ashamed for making her cry. I'd suggested we call instead of talking by text to try to avoid making her feel that way.

Yoshin should have been the first to receive my apology, but I had no regrets. No matter what, I wanted to embrace Peach-chan—the person who liked the same boy as I did.

"Shichimi-chan, you actually like Canyon-san now, right?" she asked.

“Yeah, I really like him. I like him a lot. The more I spend time with him, the more I like him.”

“If that’s the case, then why did you— I mean, what would you have done if I were a spiteful person?”

“I won’t regret anything no matter what you do, Peach-chan. Besides, on our one-month anniversary, I’m planning on telling Canyon-kun everything I just told you. I’m going to tell him everything, apologize, and then confess to him again. I’m going to have him decide what he wants to do.”

“But why? It’ll be fine even if you don’t tell him! Why would you go through all that?”

“That’s just my way of gaining peace of mind. That’s why... That’s why...”

I had a tough time articulating my next thoughts. Just imagining it brought tears to my eyes. Suppressing those tears, I feigned laughter and forced myself to sound more cheerful than I felt.

“That’s why, if he dumps me, I want you to take care of Canyon-kun, okay?”

A single tear spilled down my cheek.

My chest felt tight just from the thought of what I’d done to her and what might happen to me in the future, but at least I’d managed to air the possibility cheerfully. I was glad that our call was only over voice chat, without video.

But in a very bright voice, Peach-chan gave me words of encouragement. “Don’t worry. I guarantee you it won’t turn out like that.”

“You think so?”

“Absolutely. Canyon-san is totally in love with you too, so I’ll only accept a happy report. What we talked about today will just be a secret between us two girls.”

I felt elated by the way Peach-chan spoke to me—with no formalities, as though she were speaking to a friend the same age as her. My heart felt warm, and I was filled with an emotion different from what I felt when I talked with Yoshin.

“Do you forgive me, Peach-chan?” I asked.

“Of course. You forgave me too, right? I mean, it’s not because of that, but I forgive you too. We’re friends. Oh... Was that too cheeky to say to someone older than me?”

I laughed, amused to hear her switch from casual to polite at the end. “No, that makes me happy. You’re right—we’re friends, so it would make me happy if you spoke to me casually. Thank you, Peach-chan.”

“Thanks, Shichimi-chan.”

And so, we thanked each other. Even though neither of us knew

what the other looked like, our real name, where we lived, or even what school we went to, we were able to become friends. That scenario completely mesmerized me, but I also felt like my horizons had expanded just a bit.

After that, Peach-chan and I continued chatting for a little while—from talking about Yoshin to random other things. It was already late, so we didn't chat for too long.

"It's hard to believe that a girl as sweet as you doesn't have many friends at school," I said.

"I don't really like going to school that much, but thanks to Canyon-san, it became less hard, and now I have a few friends. School's actually a lot more fun now."

I see, so thanks to Yoshin... Hearing that made me happy, and maybe because of my conversation with Peach-chan, I started feeling like I wanted to talk with Yoshin again. *No, maybe I should just go to sleep tonight.*

"Shichimi-chan, are you gonna chat with Canyon-san after this?" Peach-chan asked.

"Huh?"

"I thought maybe you were gonna end your day by talking to the person you really liked. Thank you, Shichimi-chan. I feel like I can finally put an end to the feelings I've had for him—I'd been wanting to move on for quite some time now too."

Her words stung me a little. Did I have the right to talk to him after I'd made him look so sad? Did I have the right to talk to him after I'd hurt him with such thoughtless words?

"Peach-chan, can I ask you something? What do you think about dropping honorifics with someone?"

Peach-chan seemed surprised by my sudden question. After a slight pause, she muttered, "I wouldn't feel very comfortable with it. Maybe that's because I'd worry that the other person would dislike it."

"I see. Thanks. Good night, Peach-chan."

"Oh? Uh, of course. Good night, Shichimi-chan."

Once I ended my conversation with Peach-chan, I fell into bed and continued to apologize to her in my mind. By talking to Peach-chan, who was similar to him, I felt like I was beginning to understand why Yoshin was so resistant to calling me by my name. Maybe because he hadn't interacted too much with people, he was worried about me not liking it, and yet I'd still troubled him with such a selfish demand.

"I've really done it this time."

Was Yoshin asleep already? I wanted to call him, but my body refused to move. In the end, for the first time since we'd started going out, I didn't contact Yoshin at all that night.

Chapter 5: Bidding Farewell to the Past

A lucid dream... I'm pretty sure that's the type of dream where you're aware that you're dreaming. Right then, I was having such a dream. My line of sight seemed lower than usual, and my old friends were around me. I knew immediately that this was a dream about my time in elementary school.

My body didn't move the way I wanted it to. To be precise, it wasn't moving according to my current intentions, which meant that my actions in the dream were based on the intentions of my elementary school self.

While I was hanging out with my friends, I turned to talk to a particular girl. Because it was a dream, I couldn't see the girl's face very clearly, but it was a girl I knew.

I smiled at her as we talked. She smiled back at me, and then—
That was when I woke up.

I sat up on my bed, alone. There was no one in the house but me, so even if I talked to myself, no one would hear me. With that in mind, I muttered to myself softly, as though trying to reassure myself of something.

"I remember now."

I couldn't help wondering, why now? It was the worst way to wake up. I heaved a deep sigh, as though trying to expel the heavy, despondent feelings swelling inside of me.

I wasn't sure if it was because I'd talked to Baron-san last night or because Nanami-san hadn't contacted me, but either way, I remembered. Why I wasn't able to call Nanami-san by her name. Why I chose to be alone. That was what I remembered—what I ended up *having* to remember.

"Now that I know, it's such a dumb reason," I mumbled to myself. It was true. Thinking about it now, I could swear hands down it was a silly reason, but to my young self at the time, it had come as quite a shock. Even if someone did the same thing to me now, it would probably still come as a shock.

I felt a mix of emotions, wondering why I remembered now all of a sudden and feeling relieved that I was finally able to remember. Things sure were complicated.

Glancing down at my phone, I didn't see any messages from

Nanami-san. I'd tried calling her last night out of worry, but she hadn't picked up. I wondered if something had happened to her. A terrible premonition filled my head, that perhaps because I hadn't called her by name, she'd ended up hating me. I'd even made her look sad.

As I sat alone with my thoughts, a message popped up on my phone. When I read it, I leaped out of bed.

Nanami: I'm going ahead to school. I'll see you later.

That was all the message said. Just seeing that message seemed to wipe away all the positive feelings I'd felt in the last few days. It didn't seem like she was angry or disliked me, though, since she followed up with messages about the contents for that day's bento.

I wonder if something came up. She didn't say anything about it yesterday, though. I shook my head, trying to switch gears.

Since I was no longer going to meet up with Nanami-san, I ended up with a little more time to myself to think. The problem now, of course, was how to resolve the issue of calling Nanami-san by her name.

I now remembered what had caused my aversion to calling people by their name only. It was also the main factor that made up who I was today. I didn't necessarily have any regrets about that, but, of course, I wouldn't have any problems if I could simply get rid of that hesitation. In the end, this was my own personal problem. How to resolve it, though... No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't come up with any answers.

In order to cut short the negative spiral I was bound to fall into if I remained by myself, I slapped both my cheeks to get myself fired up. A loud smacking sound reverberated through the room. I now felt completely awake, my face smarting from the beating.

I had to stop being so negative about this.

Regardless, I had to see Nanami-san. Otherwise, nothing would change. I had to get ready stat so that I could head to school.

I paid no mind to my aching cheeks as I got ready to walk out the door. Thinking back to what it was like meeting up with Nanami-san when we'd first started going out, I made my way to school—in order to see Nanami-san.



It seems kind of pompous of me to say this, but it had been a long time since I'd last walked to school by myself. Even back when those strange rumors had been going around, Nanami-san had been there

waiting for me when I'd arrived. Well, I suppose Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had been there too, but still, Nanami-san was usually next to me.

Until last month, walking to school by myself hadn't been a problem at all, but now I felt a sense of loneliness as I made my way toward my classroom. When I got there, though, Nanami-san wasn't there either.

Not knowing where she was, I looked everywhere for her, but I wasn't able to find her. Where had she gone?

Assuming she'd return to the classroom eventually, I got back to my own seat, slightly out of breath. I was sitting in the classroom feeling somewhat down when the three of them finally arrived. Nanami-san, Otofuke-san, and Kamoenai-san—the usual three—were together as normal.

"M-Morning, Yoshin," Nanami-san said when she saw me.

"Uh, yeah. Good morning, Nanami-san."

I'd returned Nanami-san's awkward greeting with an equally stilted greeting. I was pretty sure we hadn't interacted like this since the very first conversation we'd had. It was uncomfortable, and it made me nervous.

Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san looked back and forth between me and Nanami-san, concerned, making me wonder how much Nanami-san had told the two of them.

Other kids in our class were also staring our way. Their piercing gazes gave me a strange feeling. I'd felt fine even back when people had stared at us because of those rumors that had been going around, but these stares weren't necessarily critical. It was almost as if our classmates were looking at something fragile and uncertain.

"Um, today's bento is croquettes, like I already told you. You can look forward to it," Nanami-san said.

"Uh, yeah. Croquettes sound good," I replied.

"I'll see you later then."

After a much shorter conversation than usual, Nanami-san returned to her seat. I looked at Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san as if to seek help, but when their eyes met mine, they just shook their heads quietly.

At times like these, I regretted the fact that I hadn't exchanged contact info with any girl other than Nanami-san. I mean, I shouldn't regret that, but I couldn't exactly ask them what they'd heard—setting aside whether or not they would actually tell me.

That day, I ended up not really being able to talk with Nanami-san until after school. Although we ate lunch together, she sat a little ways away from me rather than practically on top of each other like usual. We had a normal conversation, but I somehow felt a distance between

us.

Between classes too, while usually it was normal for the two of us to talk, today she just talked with Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san. She didn't even try to talk with me. If I watched her during class, Nanami-san would look away whenever she noticed me looking at her. There were opposite moments too—when I would turn in her direction because I felt her looking my way, and I would catch her staring at me. When our eyes met, however, she'd turn away again.

Even though we had enjoyed each other's company during our trip until just the day before, all of that had suddenly disappeared. I felt an undeniable shock while watching Nanami-san behave as though she didn't even know me, but maybe this was all my fault—I was the one who'd made her sad first, after all. I had to accept my punishment.

Even if I understood that in my head, though, the whole situation was still shocking to me. What could I possibly do? Were we fighting? No, that didn't sound right. Seeing as it felt like she had drawn a clear line between me and her, though, I was starting to think that having an actual fight would have been easier. Plus, if it were a fight, then all we would have to do was make up. Since this wasn't a fight, would we ever be able to reconcile?

I felt my chest tighten when I asked myself that. Just thinking about it nearly made me want to cry. Would I be able to live if things were to continue this way? *Whoa, hold up. I have to stop thinking about this.* Once I started thinking negative thoughts, they just kept on coming, like a chain reaction.

Our classmates seemed restless seeing me and Nanami-san like this. I felt like we were causing all sorts of problems for them. We'd already called a hell of a lot of attention to ourselves since that morning.

I hoped there would be no more strange rumors about us. However, perhaps because we'd already endured that previous wave of rumors, we were lucky enough to go about our day without any whispers.

That day felt like the longest day in the world. It seemed to last an eternity— Okay, that's a bit melodramatic, but it *did* seem to last twice as long as usual.

Regardless, it was finally after school—the time I'd been waiting for. I was pretty sure I'd be able to talk with Nanami-san now that all our classes were over. Even if we couldn't talk at school, I was going to her house afterward, so we would be able to talk there. This was no time to be getting depressed. I had to talk with Nanami-san at all costs.

Let's not remind myself that things have been awkward at school, even

though I've had plenty of opportunities to talk to her there. Right now, I have to force myself to stay positive.

As I was getting myself pumped up, I heard someone call out to me.

"Hey, Misumai, have you got a minute?"

When I turned around, I saw Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san standing there. Nanami-san...was not. Seeing my crestfallen expression, the two girls smiled wryly. Thinking that I'd been rude, I apologized to them quietly.

"Otofuke-san, Kamoenai-san, I'm sorry. I have to go talk to Nanami-san."

"We've already gotten Nanami's permission, so come talk with us for a bit. She said she'll wait for you," Otofuke-san replied.

They've gotten Nanami-san's permission? It was then that I finally looked at the two of them. Otofuke-san looked sad, while Kamoenai-san had a serious expression on her face, not her usual relaxed smile. Seeing such rare expressions on their faces, I swallowed hard.

"Yeah, sure, of course. I might be more down than usual, but don't mind me," I said.

The two of them momentarily dropped their serious expressions and switched to wry smiles, though they looked like they might start crying at any moment.

"You're never that down to begin with," Otofuke-san muttered.

"This one's got it pretty bad too, huh?" Kamoenai-san added.

Whatever was going on, I decided to follow them.

What did they mean, "this one...too"? I was curious, but I kept my questions to myself as I continued walking after them in silence. We ended up not in a classroom, but on the landing of the stairwell that led up to the rooftop. There was no one else around, making the space feel pretty lonely. It was, however, the perfect place to converse where no one else could hear.

Do they always talk up here? I wondered. It was a great place to hide, a secret spot that would be difficult for others to find.

On our way to the landing, we all maintained our silence. It seemed odd to me that even Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san seemed gloomy. I'd expected them to be mad at me for hurting their friend, but it didn't seem that way at all.

"Sorry to take up your time, but Nanami came to us for help," Otofuke-san began.

"What did she say?" I asked hesitantly.

"She told us she hurt you and that she couldn't bring herself to face you properly."

Huh? Hearing something so unexpected, my mind went completely blank. *Nanami-san hurt me? What are they talking about?*

Wasn't it the other way around?

Seeing me flustered, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san looked at each other and smiled again, not knowing what to do.

“You look like this hit you like a bolt from the blue,” Otofuke-san said, shrugging her shoulders slightly.

“Misumai, do you know what’s going on? Was Nanami just jumping to conclusions?” asked Kamoenai-san, who seemed far more serious than I’d thought possible, judging from how she normally behaved. I nodded to them in response.

“How much have you two heard?” I asked.

“Um, she only said that when she asked you to call her by her name, she ended up hurting you. She seemed kind of confused too,” Otofuke-san said, spreading out her hands in an exaggerated manner. Although my eyes were drawn to the movement of her hands, I listened intently to her words, trying to think.

When they’d said, “This one...too,” earlier, had they meant that Nanami-san was also feeling down, thinking she’d hurt me somehow? How was that the case? I felt like there had been a terrible misunderstanding.

If that was the case, though, her behavior now made total sense. She wasn’t angry; she just felt awkward around me. This was no good. Although I could maybe resolve the situation by talking with her friends, I knew I had to talk with Nanami-san herself.

“Hey, Misumai,” Otofuke-san said, “I don’t really understand. Why is it that you won’t call her what she wants? I know this is between the two of you, but you seem like the type that’d do that without any problems. Did something happen?”

“Yeah, you seem oddly firm about it,” Kamoenai-san chimed in. “I’d thought for sure you’d do it pretty easily.”

Although they weren’t able to get rid of the heaviness in the air among us, the two of them did their best to cheerily ask me the crux of the issue. Even so, I felt like they were giving me too much credit.

“Does it really seem like I’d do that so easily?” I asked.

“Yeah. You’re normally like, ‘I’d go through fire and water for Nanami!’”

“You seem like you’d be willing to do anything. That’s why it’s so weird.”

I don’t know if they were doing it on purpose, but both of them seemed to be making a concerted effort to return to the way they usually were. Either way, I felt incredibly grateful for the gesture. I had to laugh about the fact that their valuation of me was so remarkably high when it came to anything to do with Nanami-san. To sort through all the different thoughts in my head, I decided to tell them what I’d realized about myself.

It was a secret that I hadn't told anyone—not Nanami-san, and not even my parents. Perhaps that wasn't surprising, given that I'd just remembered that morning. I felt kind of hesitant about revealing this to Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san before I got the chance to speak to Nanami-san, but given that I was finding it difficult to tell her, maybe it would be better to tell these two first. I had to practice laying out what I felt, in order to better articulate what I would share with Nanami-san. That was something I could do with these two, precisely *because* our relationship existed through Nanami-san.

“So, this is a bit of a roundabout way of explaining this, but I'll start from the very beginning. The reason I can't call Nanami-san by her name isn't because I'm embarrassed. It's because I'm scared.”

“You're scared?”

As the two looked at me with dubious expressions, I began to explain calmly, trying to be as emotionless as possible. I just listed the facts without inserting any kind of feeling. I did it as neutrally as I could, in order for me to grasp the current situation myself.

“It started with a fairly common childhood experience. When I was in elementary school, there was a girl that I was pretty good friends with. We played together and stuff, and when I think back on it, maybe I even liked her.”

I can't tell this part to Nanami-san. To be honest, I didn't even know if I actually liked the girl, but I didn't need to say that there was a girl I liked in the past, even if it was back in elementary school. There was no need for Nanami-san to hear about that—even if it was a girl whose name or face I didn't even recall.

“You had a crush, huh? Well, it was back in elementary school, so even if you tell Nanami, you don't think she'd be jealous or anything, do you?” Kamoenai-san asked.

“Unfortunately, that's not where this story is going,” I explained. “Well, when I became friends with her, I got excited—maybe *too* excited—and I got all full of myself. I called her by her name—by just her name only, like the other kids were doing. I felt like I wanted to call her the same thing the other kids were calling her.”

There, I stopped myself, struggling to continue. I had been able to say that much, but from there, my entire mouth felt heavy. As though reacting to my feelings, the air around me started growing heavy as well.

I heard the two girls swallow hard, waiting to hear what would come next.

“What happened next?” Otofuke-san asked, breaking the silence in order to prompt me to continue. Smiling, I stumbled on with my story. It was the story about the deep wound in my heart—a wound that was silly, boring, and perhaps all too common.

“She laughed at me. She told me not to get cocky and call her by her name. She made fun of me in front of the other kids. Everyone else heard her and laughed. They were laughing at me. I know they didn’t mean any harm by it, but they were all standing around me, laughing.”

Maybe trying to act like I didn’t care about it made me end up coming across as more pathetic. When I finished my confession, though, I noticed the girls draw deep breaths.

“Isn’t that...”

“...A terrible thing to do?”

I thought they might laugh at me and tell me it was a silly story, but they did no such thing. They’d both heard me out from start to finish with looks of sorrow on their faces.

What I’d experienced was most likely the innocent cruelty of young children—something that anyone could go through. I was fairly certain that there had been no malice involved. No one could have guessed that I would be as hurt as I was. This was the result of my own weakness. Even I would never have guessed how much of an impact such a small thing could have.

Not wanting to remember it, I must have shoved it deep into my subconscious, perhaps similarly to what Nanami-san had experienced. Compared to Nanami-san’s secret, though, mine was more of a frivolous incident. This wasn’t the kind of thing to compare it against in the first place.

As the two girls continued to look at me with pained expressions, I forced myself to smile and continue speaking, just to let them know it wasn’t a big deal.

“After that, I never dropped honorifics again. Whether it was someone’s given name or family name, as long as I could attach an honorific to it, then it was fine. It really didn’t affect my daily life. In fact, I feel like people thought I was more polite than I actually was.”

“Nanami isn’t like them, though,” Otofuke-san said. “I mean, she’s asking you to drop it, so she’d be happy about it. She’d never laugh at you— No, sorry. This isn’t something you should be hearing from me.”

“It’s true, though,” Kamoenai-san continued. “Nanami will be fine, but I understand it’s still scary.”

I felt bad hearing the two of them try to come up with things to say. It was true, though—Nanami-san wasn’t like the kids I’d been friends with back then.

“Sorry for telling you such a weird story. But you’re right. Nanami-san would be happy, I’m sure. I know that in my head. That’s why this is my own problem.”

Hearing my response, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san grew silent. Otofuke-san, however, considered what I’d told them and tilted her

head. "But if you knew all this, why didn't you just tell Nanami? If she knew, I'm sure Nanami wouldn't have pushed you."

That was a perfectly reasonable question. It was true—the fact that I'd forgotten all about it had complicated matters further.

"As it turns out, I only remembered this morning," I replied.

"This morning?!" the two yelled in unison.

Yeah, that was a pretty reasonable response, right? I admit, I even astonished myself with that one. It was a silly, pitiful memory of my past. The one saving grace was that the two weren't laughing at me... Or maybe it would have been better if they had laughed.

"That's why I thought I'd been the one to hurt Nanami-san, but I guess she thought she was the one who hurt me, huh?"

Nanami-san had even cried that day. That's why I thought I'd hurt her. But it appeared that wasn't the case.

"She said that when she asked you to call her by her name, you looked really sad, so she thought she'd hurt you and felt really awful. She said she felt really bad for what she did to you. Oh, but don't tell her I told you this."

Kamoenai-san nodded. "Yeah, she said she never meant to make you look like that. When I see you now, I know what she was trying to say."

Judging from how they were talking to me, I could kind of guess at the kind of expression I had on my face. I probably looked like I had last night.

Suddenly, Baron-san's last comment came to mind. Nanami-san hadn't started crying *because* of me, but *for* me.

When I looked up, I saw the two girls were bowing to me.

"Sorry, Misumai, for making you talk about something painful," Otofuke-san said.

"Yeah, we're sorry. I know there are sometimes things we don't want to share, plus we heard it before Nanami did."

I panicked and asked them both to raise their heads, but they wouldn't budge. On top of that, they started saying they would do anything they could to help—that they would do anything to have me and Nanami-san back to the way we were.

Why would they do so much for us? I wondered. As I sat there flustered, the two explained, telling me how much they loved Nanami-san and how they'd do anything for her. They wanted to see Nanami-san happy with me again. They raised their heads slightly and laughed, telling me not to worry because it was for their own good.

Seeing the resolution of the two friends and witnessing their love for Nanami-san, I, too, made up my mind. I was now determined, feeling that in that moment I could do anything for Nanami-san.

"You said you'd help with anything, right?" I asked.

“Yup. If it’s to keep Nanami from being sad, we’re willing to do anything,” Otofuke-san said.

Hearing those words, I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. To be honest, I really wasn’t good with stuff like this, but desperate times called for desperate measures. It didn’t matter what it was—I just had to do *something*.

I looked straight at the two of them and slowly opened my mouth. “Otofuke-san, can you punch me?”

“Excuse me?!” Otofuke-san cried, as though she wasn’t following what I was saying.

Kamoenai-san just looked at me, completely shocked with her mouth wide open. As if that wasn’t enough, she also mumbled, “Are you a masochist?”

No, that wasn’t it. I had no such inclination, and even if I did, I wouldn’t ask my classmate to partake.

When the two took a step away from me, I cleared my throat then tried to explain my intentions. “You do martial arts, right?” I asked. “Maybe you can try to beat some fighting spirit into me—enough spirit to blow away my past.”

Sure, it was an old-fashioned approach. If I were strong, I’m sure I would’ve been able to bounce back from my depression without asking for anyone else’s help and gone to talk to Nanami-san regardless. But I didn’t think I was able to do that. And, since that was the case, I just had to learn to rely on others. *Let’s have someone revitalize my spineless spirit by force.*

“Are you serious?” Otofuke-san asked.

I nodded slowly in response. Then I laughed, just a little bit. It wasn’t a laugh of resignation, and it wasn’t fake. *Smile, Yoshin—show that you’ve made up your mind to move forward.*

“When you’re telling me that Nanami-san is over there looking like that for my sake, I can’t sit here moping,” I said. “I guess it’s just male stubbornness, though I’m surprised I have any of that in me. I know it’s not cool that I can’t get over this all by myself, but even if it means getting someone else to help me, I want to bid farewell to my past.”

Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san looked at each other...and laughed. They briefly mumbled, “Who says it’s not cool?” and then laughed even more heartily.

“What can I say? I guess guys tend to think alike, huh? Misumai, you remind me of my big brother,” Otofuke-san said.

“Your brother?” I repeated.

“My brother does martial arts too. Sometimes, before a match, he gets freaked out about going up against a tough opponent. When that happens, I try to get him fired up.”

Rather than providing her fist, Otofuke-san spread her palm and waved it at me. Then, with the other hand, she pointed her index finger at me and indicated for me to turn around.

I see. I think I understand.

Once I'd turned my back to them, I closed my eyes then made one simple request: "Go for it."

"All right!"

A voice so full of self-confidence that it was unimaginable coming from a teenage girl reverberated through the air. Overwhelmed by its intensity, I gritted my teeth. I heard the sound of something slicing the air, and in the next moment, I felt such a shock run through my body that it couldn't possibly be described as the impact of a push to the back. I knew it wasn't possible, but I almost felt like I heard a loud sound immediately following the impact.

"Agh!"

I gritted my teeth again and barely managed to keep myself from crying, but I couldn't stop myself from letting a groan escape my mouth. The spot where Otofuke-san had smacked me felt hot, as though it were on fire. The tingling numbness seemed to spread throughout my body.

All right! Fighting spirit beaten in!

"Nanami's in the classroom. She's probably waiting for you, Misumai," Otofuke-san said.

"Good luck!" Kamoenai-san called.

They both gave me a thumbs-up, and I returned the gesture. With that, I began running as though someone had lit a fire under me.

"Thanks, you two! I'm off!"

"Oh, hold on a sec..."

The two girls started saying something, but I didn't hear them. Having so many people help me was definitely uncool, but in that moment, more than anything, I had to get to Nanami-san.





“Hey, Hatsumi, do you think Misumai heard that there are still other people in the classroom?”

“It should be fine.”



I ran. I ran without a thought to the stares of the people around me. I was out of breath immediately, and I felt a burning sensation in my throat. Still, I just kept on running. It hurt even to breathe, and my lungs were screaming for mercy.

When I reached the door to our classroom, I threw it open at full force. It moved smoothly and hit the wall at high speed, making a dull bang reverberate throughout the classroom.

Nanami-san—who was sitting inside—opened her eyes wide when she saw me. Several strands of her hair had fallen out of place. Maybe she’d had her head down on her desk. When I looked closely, I also noticed that one of her cheeks was slightly red.

I felt like I could see her face clearly. The depression I’d been feeling the entire day was gone, while the pain in my back made me think clearer.

I headed straight for Nanami-san, trying not to kill the momentum I’d found on my way here.

“Yoshin?” Nanami-san stood up from her seat. Even as the desk clanged loudly, I didn’t fail to notice her take a step back from me as I approached. “Yoshin, I, um... So, uh...”

Her hesitant words reached my ears, but I continued moving toward her without responding to them. When I finally stood in front of her, I fell silent.

Nanami-san and I were fairly similar in height. When we were both standing, we were almost at eye level. After looking at her straight in the eyes, I embraced her.

“Huh?!” she exclaimed.

I didn’t say anything. I just held her tightly in silence, taking care not to hold tight enough to break her.

The last time I’d held her like this had probably been on that evening when I’d gone to her house for the first time. Back then, I’d held her and spoken words to console her, but today, I said nothing. I already knew what I wanted to say to her first.

“Thanks for waiting, Nanami.”

I whispered those words softly and tenderly into her ear. I was finally able to say the one thing I hadn’t been able to say until now.

Since I was holding her, I couldn't see her face, but I felt her draw in a breath. I felt like I'd made her wait for such a long time. Of course, I knew that it hadn't been that long, but that was just how it felt.

I loosened my arms from around her, looked at her, and smiled.

"Yoshin?" Nanami-san said hesitantly.

I felt refreshed, as though I'd finally had some kind of a breakthrough. I wished I could say that my trauma was no big deal, but I'd needed the help of so many people to get here. I felt kind of pathetic, but I couldn't think about that now.

Nanami-san looked at me with a blank expression, and I called her name once again.

"What's wrong, Nanami? Is there something on my face?"

"No, I mean... Huh? Are you okay?"

"I'm sorry, Nanami. I've caused so many misunderstandings."

At that very moment, Nanami-san hugged me back, practically leaping into my arms. In a soft voice that was barely audible, she apologized to me. Her apology couldn't be heard by the others in the room, because...

The classroom was immediately filled by the cheers of the classmates who had stayed behind to see us through.

Wait, what?! Why are there so many people still here?! Shoot, did I do that in front of all these people?!

Even if I panicked, I couldn't take back what I'd done. Nanami-san was crying in my arms, so I couldn't entangle myself from her either. I just went with the flow and hugged Nanami-san back. Her tears didn't feel cold this time; they felt like warm tears of happiness.

The people around us were watching me and Nanami-san and laughing, but their faces weren't at all like the laughing faces I remembered from this morning. They seemed, instead, to be smiling in congratulations.

When I saw their reactions, I mumbled, "Wow. I didn't realize doing it wouldn't be so bad." Even that muttering, though, was drowned out by the shouts of joy coming from the others around us.

I supposed I really had been overthinking things. I felt like, in that moment, the trauma I'd held inside of me disappeared completely. I'd been saved by so many people.

As I hugged Nanami-san back, she slid her arms around my back and returned my tight embrace.

"Ouch, Nanami! Uh, is it possible for you to loosen your grip a little? My back hurts."

"Your back? What do you mean it hurts? What happened?"

"Oh, I just got some energy beaten into me, is all. Honestly, it worked. It was super effective."

Actually, I wonder if it would have hurt less if Otofuke-san had straight up punched me. I never realized that being slapped with an open palm would hurt so much.

In any case, thanks to the pain in my back, I felt like I had someone pushing and encouraging me from behind at all times and I'd been able to call Nanami-san by her name so easily.

"What's that supposed to mean? Tell me what happened later, okay?"

"I'll tell you everything—about my back and why I couldn't call you by your name. It's a pathetic story, though. Will you still hear me out?"

"Yeah, I want to hear it. If it's about you, then I want to know everything."

Nanami-san leaned slightly away from me and smiled beautifully. Even as I continued to feel the tingling pain in my back, I smiled at Nanami-san in that classroom filled with cheers. As we stood there, looking into each other's eyes...

"Kiss already!"

"This is what you get for making us worry! Just do it!"

"Keep your lovers' tiffs to a minimum!"

We started getting all sorts of comments from the people around us. We seemed to have caused them more worry than I had imagined. While I felt bad, I also felt grateful that our classmates had been thinking of us. At the very least, I'd have to make an effort from now on to match their names and faces.

Just as I was thinking that, Nanami-san took a step away from me and shouted, her face bright red, "We wouldn't do that! I want my first kiss to be somewhere special!"

"Huh?! Nanami, you haven't had your first kiss yet?!"

Wow. She'd totally brought that one on herself. I covered my face with one hand, trying to hide my heated cheeks. Before Nanami-san could do even that, she screamed and jumped at our classmates, her cheeks as red as mine.

Seeing Nanami-san acting that way, I smiled in relief, thinking we'd finally gotten back to our normal selves. When I looked toward the door to the classroom, I saw that Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had also returned.

"Hey, mister. Can you do something about your wife? She's super scary," someone called out.

"He's not my husband yet!" Nanami-san shouted.

"Not yet, huh?" came the response.

Oh, boy. Nanami-san's on a roll. I should go help her out.

I bowed to Nanami-san's two friends standing in the doorway and then turned and walked over to Nanami-san, who seemed ready to

grab another classmate.

This was going to be the last time I would let my past make me hesitate to do something. Maybe in the future something else would crop up that would make me unable to take a step forward, but even still, I wanted to swear that this would be the last time.

That day, for the first time ever, I stepped into the circle of my classmates.

As a side note, the photo of me and Nanami-san taken by one of those classmates ended up being the wallpaper on Nanami-san's phone for a while.

Interlude: The Approaching Anniversary

He and I held hands on our way home. With our fingers intertwined, our palms touching, and our bodies as close together as possible. As if to make up for this morning, I was trying to feel his warmth as much as I could. Yoshin didn't seem to realize I was doing that, though.

Walking home with Yoshin was such a simple thing, and yet I realized just how precious it really was to me. I'd felt so lonely that morning. I wondered how he felt. Did he miss me too?

If so, then I really felt bad for what I'd done to him. I wanted to ask how he felt, but when I looked at him with a sidelong glance, I saw that his expression was one of absolute exhaustion. Well, a lot *had* happened that day—though it was all mainly my fault.

"I've really done it this time. How am I supposed to go to school tomorrow?" he wailed.

"I'm sorry. It was all because of me," I mumbled.

"Oh, come on, Nanami. It's not your fault."

My heart skipped a beat when he called me that, and I was smiling before I knew it. At the same time, I looked into Yoshin's face, worried he might be forcing himself to call me that, but I couldn't tell by looking at his exhausted face.

"Well, I'm just gonna be grateful that not everyone was in the classroom at that point," Yoshin said, laughing meekly.

What should I do? Should I tell him? I thought. Actually, when I'd last checked, the class group chat had exploded. I was pretty sure everyone knew what had happened by now.

Once he got to school tomorrow, he was probably going to find out, whether he liked it or not. Still, I wondered if I should stay quiet at least until then. If I did that, though, then maybe Yoshin wouldn't be able to prepare himself emotionally.

What should I do?!

"What's wrong, Nanami?"

Crap, I was standing next to him hemming and hawing so much that he thought something was wrong. I'd already been really evasive that day, so I felt awkward telling him nothing was wrong.

"I have something to report," I finally said.

"Huh? Report? What's with the weird vibe?" he asked.

I took out my phone and showed it to him. Yoshin furrowed his brow, then brought his face closer to the screen. Looking at it up close, he opened his mouth so wide that I thought his chin might fall off. He seemed unable to speak, because he simply pointed at the screen, opening and closing his mouth like a fish.

“Whoa.”

The noise he made was barely a moan. Maybe I shouldn’t have shown him after all.

“Are you gonna join the group chat, Yoshin?” I asked.

“I think joining the group under these circumstances would be a bad idea. It’d kind of be like torture.”

Okay, that was a failure in terms of changing the subject. The group chat really only consisted of those who felt like joining. Those in smaller friend groups tended to make their own group chats. Even then, though, it was hard to believe that we would become the talk of the class.

That’s what I was thinking, but Yoshin saw the messages and smiled in relief. *Huh? What’s this?*

“I thought this earlier, but I guess I was worried over nothing. Everyone was actually worried about us.”

It was true that most of the messages were about Yoshin and me making up. That was what had gotten everything all worked up. There was even a photo of me and Yoshin hugging each other. I would have to save the photo first and complain about it later.

“What do you mean, you were worried over nothing? Is this about the story you mentioned earlier?” I asked.

“Yeah. Actually, maybe we can talk about it on the way.”

As we made our way back to my house, Yoshin told me everything that had happened. What he’d experienced when he was a child, why he couldn’t call me by my name, why his back hurt... I walked in silence and listened to his story. He was speaking calmly, but I could tell from his expression that he felt both refreshed and also somewhat lonely.

“I’m pathetic, huh?” he muttered.

“Not at all,” I said, immediately refuting his claim.

I see, I thought. Yoshin experienced a traumatic event in the past, and he was able to overcome it. I guess we really are alike. Maybe the reason I became attracted to him was because I’d picked up on that subconsciously, though maybe that’s reading too much into it.

I squeezed his hand a little bit. Then he squeezed my hand back. That simple gesture made me so happy, but I also became slightly worried.

“I’m really happy and all, but are you sure you’re not forcing yourself to call me by my name?” I asked him.

“I’m totally fine. It was no big deal once I finally said it. That said, I don’t think I’ll be doing the same for other people,” Yoshin responded, smiling at me.

I felt relieved to hear that, but I also felt like it was a missed opportunity for him not to do the same with other people. After all, there was so much more of a friendly atmosphere among all of us now, so why shouldn’t he address other people more casually too?

“Yo—” I started.

“Also, you know, I want to save that for you,” he said.

His unexpected comeback caught me totally off guard! Well, it felt like a comeback, but Yoshin probably didn’t mean it that way. We’d talked over each other, so he hadn’t heard what I’d been about to say. Yeah, he didn’t mean anything by it. He didn’t mean anything by it, but...

“Heh heh heh...”

I knew my laugh sounded kind of creepy, but I couldn’t stop myself. If someone pointed out I was being too opportunistic, then I wouldn’t be able to argue. Still, I couldn’t stop my overwhelming feeling of joy that he’d decided to call me by my name. Just thinking about him doing it especially for me made me super happy.

“N-Nanami?”

When I heard Yoshin’s voice, I finally snapped back to reality, noticing how creeped out he sounded. I coughed once to clear my throat and then straightened my posture, turning to him to say...

“Eh heh heh...”

Dang it, I couldn’t stop smiling. Yet another creepy expression of giddiness was starting to spread across my face.

Yoshin seemed a little bit taken aback at first, but then he sighed and offered me a wry smile. We smiled at each other and then started laughing. I was glad to be able to laugh together like this. Relief and happiness swept over me. Feeling sentimental, I decided that I wanted to somehow capture this feeling, and so I came out with an idea.

“Hey, Yoshin, how about we go to an arcade?”

“An arcade? You go to those too? Is there a game you want to play?” he asked.

“No, no. I just thought it’d be nice to go take pictures in a photo booth. You know, as a way to commemorate today. What do you think?”

It seemed Yoshin and I had very different ideas of things to do at an arcade. He thought of games, while I thought of photo booths. I also sometimes played with the claw machines, but that was about it.

He thought for a moment and then agreed to the idea, although somewhat hesitantly. He was blushing as if he were embarrassed. What was going on?

“I’ve never been in a photo booth,” he told me.

I couldn’t help but find his embarrassment adorable—though I guess you’re not supposed to call guys “adorable.” I swallowed my comment and came up with a different response instead.

“In that case, let’s make today your first time! I’m gonna get to be with you first!”

“Nanami-san?! Don’t you think that sounds misleading?!”

Whoops, he’d fallen back into calling me “Nanami-san” again. Apparently, it had slipped out due to shock. I was just happy we’d get to share more firsts together. What was he panicking so much about?

Our first time together... Wait. Huh?

“Oh!” I exclaimed, finally realizing what I’d said. My cheeks grew hot. *No, no—that’s not what I meant! That’s not what I meant at all!*

When he saw just how red I was turning, Yoshin simply laughed.

“Jeez... Yoshin, you idiot.”

“Hold on—you brought this one on yourself. How is it my fault?”

I swung our linked hands more forcefully, trying to hide just how embarrassed I was. I knew he hadn’t done anything wrong, but I couldn’t help letting my displeasure escape my mouth. As I took several moments of silence to cool my cheeks, he was kind enough to watch over me without saying anything.

“Speaking of anniversaries...” he mumbled once I’d calmed down a bit. He seemed to be looking directly at me while also gazing off into the distance. Maybe he was nervous, because he spoke his words like they were punctuated, stumbling over every syllable. I waited for him to continue. Then, slightly embarrassed, slightly hesitant, he did just that. “It’s our one-month anniversary next week, huh?”

Our one-month anniversary. The event was meant to be a milestone for the two of us to celebrate. For me, though, the phrase indicated a time limit. Yes, I’d been having so much fun that I’d completely forgotten, but next week marked a full month since I’d confessed to Yoshin and we’d started going out.

“You remembered,” I replied.

“Yeah. I mean, it’s an important day. It’d be nice to make our date before then kind of special, huh?”

Looking worried, Yoshin muttered something about how our recent trip had been a bit *too* special. He appeared to be brainstorming what we should do for our next date. As for me, I stood there feeling both happy that he’d remembered the date and nervous that it was just around the corner.

On that day, I was going to tell him again. What would he do then? When the time came, I had to be brave, just like he had been earlier.

Slowly but surely, our fateful day was approaching, but whatever

the outcome, I'd have no regrets. That was what I told myself as I held his hand tightly, showing him the brightest smile I could muster.

Chapter 2.5: An Unexpected Remark

“Oh, aren’t you going to continue? What a pity.”

“Apologies, Yoshin. We must’ve disturbed you two.”

My mom shrugged her shoulders in disappointment, unaffected by my shouts and not at all apologetic for the fact that she’d been spying on us. My dad was apologizing with his palms together, but I couldn’t really hear what he was saying.

Oh, come on. There was no way I’d let my parents see something like this. I knew that kind of stuff happened all the time in manga, but this was *so* embarrassing. This was even more embarrassing than when Nanami-san’s parents saw us the other day. I felt the heat rising in my cheeks from embarrassment.

“I was getting so nervous thinking we were gonna get to see a first kiss in front of the evening view,” Saya-chan said. She was holding both her cheeks in her hands in an effort to cool them down. Actually, her face seemed even redder than mine was. Our parents were looking down at her, smiling.

I had thought Saya-chan seemed quite mature, but now she was looking much more her age. Just seeing her made me calm down a little.

It was then that I heard a soft murmur and felt something warm touch my hands.

“Uh, um, Yoshin...”

Feeling the sudden warmth, I looked down and saw Nanami-san’s hands touching mine—as in, my hands that were covering her ears.

“Um, you know, it’d be nice if you could let go now. It kinda tickles...”

“Oh!”

“Onee-chan’s ears have always been her weakness,” Saya-chan said.

What? Really?!

I’d covered Nanami-san’s ears because I’d wanted to protect her hearing while I’d shouted at my parents. I’d had no idea that would lead to me learning such a crucial piece of information about her. The soft yet springy sensation I felt on the palms of my hands now felt sacred, as though I shouldn’t be touching her ears at all.

All of a sudden, my sense of nervousness flew through the roof, and I involuntarily moved my hands. As if by reflex, I accidentally

caressed her ears. In response, Nanami-san writhed and let out a soft moan.

“Hngh!”

Her ears really are her weakness, I thought. Her reaction ignited a sense of mischief within me, and I felt the impulse to do it again, but then Nanami-san looked up and glared at me. Meeting her stare, I slowly removed both my hands from her ears and raised them to indicate my surrender.

Nanami-san was pouting, but only for a moment. The next moment, she was grinning and raising her hands, extending them toward me. As she placed her hands on both my sides, I felt a chill run up my spine. Her smile grew wider, and I felt her tighten her grip.

“May we continue, then?”

Ah, that’s right. Our parents are still here. Nanami-san looked at my mom, then blushed and removed her hands. It seemed I’d been saved.

“Just so you know, Yoshin’s weakness is in fact his sides, so you should give it a try later.”

On second thought, it seemed I had *not* been saved.

In response to my mother’s unnecessary comment, Nanami-san’s eyes flashed. She seemed really intent on trying it out on me later. Our eyes met, and she flashed me a toothy smile. *I guess I’ll just have to prepare myself.* I let out a deep sigh and, while still troubled, turned to look at my mom.

“What are you all doing here, anyway?” I asked.

“We’ve put our bags in our room already, so we stopped by to ask if you wanted to join us in the hot springs. If you soak in the tub for a bit, it’ll help you relax and get some good sleep.”

“In that case, you could’ve at least said something.”

“We’re not so ill-mannered as to rain on the parade of a couple getting in the mood.”

As if spying on people wasn’t ill-mannered. Plus they ultimately had rained on our parade—though I supposed that was only because I’d noticed them.

In any case, the hot springs, huh? I couldn’t deny that it seemed like a good idea.

“Hot springs, huh? Nanami-san, what do you think?”

“Uhhh, yeah. I did get a little sweaty, so it might be nice to freshen up. Oh!”

Nanami-san seemed to realize something and scooted away from me. She twisted around and used both arms to hug her body, as though trying to cover it up and hide it. Of course, she wasn’t managing to hide it at all.

“Do I, uh, smell bad? We spent a lot of time traveling, plus I haven’t even showered yet.”

“Not at all. I think you actually smell quite nice.”

Without thinking, I sniffed the air. Yup, she smelled soft and sweet, like pleasant perfume. I’d heard people say that women smell really good, and I had to admit it was true.

That was when I finally realized that maybe what I was doing was super insensitive or even somewhat perverted. In my defense, if your girlfriend asked you whether she smelled bad, wouldn’t you smell her too? If I’d done nothing, I’d have had no answer to give her. So, even if I had chosen that particular course of action without warning her, I don’t think anyone could blame me for it. Yup, self-defense complete.

But in front of me, Nanami-san was bright red. *Um, should I say something?* I wondered. *I can’t come up with the right words, but I have to say something.* After some deliberation, the words that came out of my mouth were...

“You smell nice.”

“Don’t say it twice!”

That was no good. Both our parents also seemed somewhat exasperated with me. Yeah, this was completely my bad. Damn, Nanami-san was punching me, albeit without much force.

After I managed to calm her down, we all headed off to the hot springs.

Afterword

To those of you who decided to pick up this book, it's been three months since the previous volume! I'm Yuishi.

I'm glad I was able to deliver this third volume to you without incident. All the snow that was piled up high when volume two was released has now completely melted. Although it's still chilly here in Hokkaido, we're gradually transitioning into spring.

Time sure passes quickly. The announcement included in the previous volume indicated a May 1st release for volume three, but the date arrived in no time. Golden Week is just around the corner. I was pleasantly surprised when I saw the date updated to April 30th...

For those of you who've become newly employed, have advanced a grade in school, or have even started attending a new school last month, I do hope that you can relax during Golden Week. And if, during that break, you're able to curl up with this very book, nothing would make me happier.

Now, about this volume. I hope that those of you who've read it already were able to enjoy it. Some of you may be starting with this afterword, so I'll try to avoid any major spoilers. One thing I do want to note is that when my editor read this volume, they were surprised to see our protagonists having a real fight. When I'd first shown them my initial outlines for the volume, they'd wondered whether they were even able to.

Most people would describe fights among couples as a thing no one would want to touch. I wonder how the fight between our couple in volume three appeared to everyone. Whether you think people with thriving love lives should step on a bed of nails or you think fighting is just an indication of a strong relationship, I would love for you to share your thoughts.

The story has now entered its third week of our protagonists' relationship. If the series were to take a typical four part approach of beginning, development, twist, and end, then this volume would be the twist.

How much of your childhood do you remember? I'm the type who doesn't have many memories from my time in elementary school. I can hardly remember what I used to do back then. In this volume, we touched on memories like that—about the past experiences of our main character, Yoshin. The web novel version only talked about this

briefly, but I decided to go into a bit more depth in the light novel.

Childhood trauma may appear to be a small thing to others, but to the individual, it can cause a wound deeper than anyone else realizes. I personally think that the younger we are when we experience such trauma, the deeper in our subconscious the memory is engraved and, as a result, perhaps more difficult it is for us to deal with.

In order to overcome such trauma, it's necessary for us to recognize it, but I also imagine that our relationships with the people around us become important, and so we ought to cherish fortuitous meetings with others. Of course, I'm not an expert, though, so those are all just my personal opinions.

Oh, by the way, the reason I don't remember much about my past is not that I've experienced a traumatic event but that I'm a forgetful person. I'm pretty sure that's the case, anyway, but maybe I've just forgotten.

In any case, for volume three, I increased the amount of new content. I was allowed to write whatever I wanted to write, so the fact that we had more scenes with glasses was also because of my own personal preferences. It may just be that volume three has more new content than volume four.

Yes, volume four. I know I just kind of mentioned it offhand, but there will be a volume four.

At the time of volume two's publication, the release of volume three hadn't yet been decided, so I'd written the afterword without knowing whether we'd be able to have a third volume. This time, however, I'm writing this afterword already knowing that volume four's on the horizon.

Volume four, everyone—volume four! Of course, I'd been wanting it to happen, but I didn't think it actually would. This is all thanks to the readers who've continued to support and purchase the series. Thank you so very much!

The first volume featured the first week of the relationship, the second volume featured the second week, and the third volume featured the third week, which means that volume four will feature week four. A month will finally pass!

Earlier, I mentioned that volume three was the twist of our story line, so volume four will be the conclusion or resolution. I do hope you'll all watch over our two main characters as they face their one-month anniversary—the day when the dust will finally settle.

My editor, Kobayashi-sama, continued to put so much time and effort into volume three. We were both sick at various points, so for the next volume, I hope we can both stay healthy.

I am sincerely grateful to Kagachisaku-sensei for continuing to provide the illustrations for the series. I always look forward to seeing

such high-quality art, even in its supposed draft stages. I entrust volume four to you as well.

As announced on the obi of this volume, the manga adaptation by Nagomi Kanna-sensei is set to start in the summer. I was given the opportunity to read the initial storyboard of the work, but I have to admit that I'm looking forward to it, even just as a plain ol' reader. The rough draft that I read was of such high quality that I was immediately overcome with the realization of just how amazing manga artists are.

And finally, a word of gratitude to the readers who have continued to stick with the series this far. I received a fan letter for the first time after the release of volume two. I never thought I'd receive such a thing, so I can't tell you how excited I was. I wanted to express my thanks here once again.

I look forward to continuing to put my all into writing this story. It would mean the world to me to have your continued support.

Well, that's all for now. I look forward to seeing everyone again in volume four.

Yuishi
April 2022



Nanami-san was wearing a white button-down shirt and a blue necktie, along with a tight black skirt.

“When I told my mom I was going to tutor you, she let me borrow them. What do you think? I could pass for a teacher, right? Do I look cute?”

A CHERRY BLOSSOM DATE ♪



A STROLL THROUGH A
RETRO CITYSCAPE ♪





“I’m sorry, Nanami. I’ve caused so many misunderstandings.”

At that very moment, Nanami-san hugged me back, practically leaping into my arms.

Bonus Short Stories

Sightseeing on a Rickshaw

I was feeling both the refreshing breeze and Nanami-san's gentle warmth—living a moment of true luxury. As I enjoyed the view, I couldn't help looking over at her from time to time.

When she was happy, I was happy. I know that's an uninspiring thing to say, but I can't help it. When I saw her all excited like that, my spirits, too, were uplifted.

At that moment, Nanami-san and I were riding a rickshaw, watching the city whiz by as the rickshaw driver talked us through the sights. Taking in such unfamiliar scenery was already fun and eye-opening, but the stories the young man told us made it interesting too.

He was telling us all sorts of things about the history of the city, all the while tossing jokes into the mix. His colorful method of storytelling reminded me of the tour guide on the bus rides during my graduation trip—though I had to admit, I couldn't really remember those rides terribly well. In any case, they'd probably told stories similar to this.

"This view is quite spectacular if you look at it from this angle—you can see the ocean and the mountains at the same time," he explained as he led us along the water. Nanami-san and I shifted our gaze from the ocean toward the view ahead of us.

The ocean breeze grazed our skin as a brilliant green mountain leaped into view against a cloudless blue sky. It was the kind of view we'd never be able to see in our daily lives.

Nanami-san squealed in excitement and started taking loads of pictures. I joined her and snapped a few pictures myself. It was probably the first time in my life that I'd taken photos like this.

The rickshaw gradually slowed, and the young man brought us to a stop. When Nanami-san and I tilted our heads, wondering what was going on, the driver turned to us slowly and smiled.

"Would you like me to take a photo of the two of you? It'd make a nice keepsake," he said, extending his hand toward us. Nanami-san and I graciously accepted his offer and slowly stepped out of the rickshaw.

"Oh!"

However, as she was getting out of the vehicle, Nanami-san lost her balance. On impulse, I reached out my hands to support her—but

because I wasn't accustomed to my kimono, as soon as I made contact with her, I felt myself almost floating in a strange fashion.

Whoa! Are kimono really this heavy?! I'm losing my balance!

As we both began to tumble backwards, I held Nanami-san as tight as I could in an attempt to save at least her. I thought that, if we hit the ground, I'd be able to serve as a cushion for her—but our bodies, which had been on the verge of falling, simply remained out of balance without toppling over.

"Huh?"

Wondering why I felt no impact no matter how many seconds passed, I soon realized that the young man was—quite effortlessly—holding up both me and Nanami-san. He never lost balance at all; he even still had a smile on his face.

"Th-Thank you," I muttered while he was still supporting me. The young man nodded silently and helped me to return to a standing position. I must have been pretty heavy, but his movement was so fluid, I could have been weightless.

He was amazing. I felt like I could fall in love with him—metaphorically speaking, of course. I mean, what kind of training did it take to be able to do that? When I thought more about it, I realized he wasn't even out of breath, despite the fact that he'd been pulling a rickshaw this entire time.

As I stood there in awe, the young man assumed a gentle expression and asked, "Since we're at it, shall we take a photo of the two of you just like that?"

"What?!"

Wait, what's that supposed to mean? As I was standing there so visibly confused that you could practically see the question marks flying about my head, I heard a soft voice come from inside my arms. The voice was a little shaky and so quiet it was almost inaudible.

"Um, Yoshin, can you, uh, let me go now?"

There in my arms stood Nanami-san, who was wiggling bashfully. *Oh, that's right,* I thought. *I was so caught up in trying to protect her, I grabbed her without thinking.* I was so shocked by being saved myself that I'd completely forgotten what I'd done.

When the driver smiled again and reiterated his offer, I declined it and let Nanami-san go. It felt awkward releasing her abruptly, so I did so as cautiously as I could. We instead asked him to take a photo of the two of us as we stood side by side with the mountain behind us. In the end, we ended up with photos in which both of us were blushing slightly. I was pretty sure that if anyone with half a brain saw them, they'd be able to guess something had happened.

Once the two of us had thanked the driver, we got back on the rickshaw and took off again. That time, we didn't lose our balance and

managed to step back into the rickshaw smoothly.

When we started off again, the breeze felt slightly chilly. Our faces had felt so hot before that the difference in temperature was even more pronounced. The breeze felt nice, perfect for cooling down our faces.

Nanami-san closed her eyes to better enjoy the breeze. As my flushed face finally returned to normal, I felt a comfortable weight against my body. When I turned to the side to look, I saw that Nanami-san had scooted closer again.

“Thanks for saving me back there,” she whispered.

“Nah, I really couldn’t do anything.”

“Still, thank you.”

Pressing her body closer to mine, Nanami-san smiled at me. But really, it was the young man pulling the rickshaw who’d done all the saving; I hadn’t been of any use at all.

As I was looking, conflicted, at the smiling Nanami-san, she soon frowned angrily and skillfully brought her hands up to my cheeks, her body still attached to mine. She pinched my cheeks lightly. It didn’t hurt, but I felt her proceed to pull on them.

“Wha har you hooing?” I asked as best I could.

“I already thanked you for helping me, so maybe now I’m punishing you for trying to do something dangerous,” she responded, not sounding so sure herself. With her head tilted, Nanami-san continued pulling on my cheeks and moving them up and down, left and right. Like I said, I didn’t feel any pain, but because she was tugging on my cheeks, I could only produce funny sounds. She seemed to be enjoying it, as she continued playing with my face.

“Hi din hink hit was hangerous,” I replied.

“No, no—it *was* dangerous. I appreciate that you were trying to break my fall, but I don’t want you getting hurt because of me.”

When Nanami-san finally released my cheeks, she puffed out her own cheeks and pouted. I took the opportunity to get back at her, poking at her cheeks to deflate them. I could feel the softness of her face against my fingertip. It was kind of fun. I wondered if Nanami-san had been enjoying a similar sensation when she’d been playing with my cheeks earlier.

“But I don’t want you to get hurt, Nanami-san. I mean, you’re a girl. It’d be bad for you to get scars and stuff.”

“Jeez...”

When I poked her cheek again, Nanami-san looked dissatisfied. She reached out to touch my finger and began to stroke it gently.

Having my finger stroked...was a whole new experience for me. I felt an indescribable tingle enveloping my entire body. The sensation was somehow comfortable, and every time Nanami-san moved her

own fingers, I felt as though that feeling were getting stronger.

I felt like something unfortunate might happen if I let her keep it up, so I pulled my finger away. Nanami-san watched as the tip of my finger slowly retreated. Feeling embarrassed from having her gaze so concentrated on my finger, I hurried to hide it away. Nanami-san seemed to see right through me though, because she flashed me a mischievous grin.

“Well, even if I do get some scars, you’ll take responsibility for it, so it’s okay, right?”

“Whoa, wait, what are you saying?!”

Hearing my reaction, Nanami-san laughed devilishly. *Does she know what she’s saying or not? Which is it? And what am I supposed to say to that?*

It seemed the rickshaw driver had overheard our conversation, because he caught us off guard with a chuckle. Well, yeah, I guess he would hear us, being so close and all. That should have been obvious, but his laugh made us suddenly remember we weren’t alone. Either way, it was too late for that.

“Uh, excuse me,” he said, coughing to clear his throat. Nanami-san and I looked at each other and smiled awkwardly.

“Sorry for making you have to see that,” I said.

“Oh, no, not at all. It reminded me of a date with my wife.”

“With your wife? What kind of a date was it?” Nanami-san asked, perking up a bit.

Since the incident the other day, I’d learned that girls tended to like hearing about the romantic affairs of other people. Nanami-san seemed to be no exception.

Although the young man seemed somewhat embarrassed, he responded to Nanami-san sincerely. “Our first date was here, actually,” he explained. “We wanted to grow closer, so we decided to take the rickshaw, just like the two of you are doing. That’s why it’s so emotional for me to serve as a guide for other couples like this.”

“That’s so lovely! When did you two start dating?” Nanami-san asked.

“We started dating in college. We were at the same high school, but then we also ended up going to the same college. And we...just started going out.”

The young man continued to tell us his story, scratching his cheek with his finger as though embarrassed. Nanami-san seemed to be enjoying listening. I had a tough time inserting myself into conversations like these, so during this one, too, I ended up mainly listening. Nanami-san, on the other hand, seemed truly invested—she continued asking him various questions and nodding at his responses. *I guess she really does like hearing about this kind of thing*, I thought.

“Are the two of you from around here?” the young man asked.

“We’re just visiting, actually,” Nanami-san replied.

“Oh, how nice. A trip as a couple.”

“Oh, no. We’re, um, actually here with both of our families.”

The young man paused and glanced at us. I thought that maybe he was thinking it rare for two high schoolers to be on a trip together—but I was wrong.

“Are you two close siblings or something?” he asked.

“No, she’s my girlfriend!”

Despite my overly snappy response, Nanami-san seemed delighted. I was pretty sure that siblings weren’t *that* intimate with each other—though I suppose Otofuke-san and her stepbrother were a couple too, so maybe it was possible.

When the driver had first called out to us, though, he’d addressed us as a couple. That must have meant he’d recognized us as one. Had I said something weird to make him think otherwise?

The young man looked at the two of us once again, and then, slowing down the pace of the rickshaw, thought for a moment and said, “It’s pretty rare for such a young couple to go on a trip with both your families. Are you two already engaged or something? Is this a prenuptial family vacation of some sort?”

He’d said that just to tease us, but both Nanami-san and I were taken by surprise. I mean, wasn’t that a few steps too far right now? Nanami-san’s eyes grew as wide as saucers. Even she thought it was one hell of a question.

“No, no. We’re still in high school, so we’re not engaged or anything,” I said.

“You’re in high school?!”

This time, it was the driver’s turn to yelp. His wide-eyed expression made his earlier handsome smile seem like a lie. *Did I really say something that surprising?*

When he saw my face, the young man shook himself, returning his earlier casual expression. “Well, it really is rare for a boy your age to go on a trip with his girlfriend’s family. Or is that normal for high schoolers these days? That sure is progressive,” he mumbled, suggesting that he was somehow impressed.

So a trip like this is rare, huh? Well, yeah, it must be rare. Even Baron-san mentioned this sort of thing only normally happens post-marriage. Hearing someone else say so made me realize just how true it was. Regardless, I had to play it off for now.

“Well, lots of things kinda happened,” I muttered.

“A lot of things... I see, you must have your reasons,” he responded, seemingly convinced by my attempt to explain. As he continued pulling the rickshaw, he nodded several times as though

savoring some new discovery. I felt bad, knowing that “lots of things” simply meant “my mom wanted us all to go on this trip.” When I thought about it, though, the situation seemed even more mysterious, even to me—but I was enjoying being here just the same.

“Oh, um, since we’re on the topic, how did the two of us appear to you?” Nanami-san suddenly asked, pointing excitedly between us.

How did we appear to him? Didn’t he just say? I wondered.

As Nanami-san eagerly awaited his response, the young man smiled and replied, “Like I mentioned before, if you two weren’t siblings, then you had to be a couple taking a trip before their wedding. I also got to take a trip with my wife’s family just before we got married.”

Nanami-san seemed satisfied with his response. She breathed out through her nose and had the brightest of smiles on her face. *Wait, did we really seem that old?*

Nanami-san seemed to be enjoying herself, though, as she was grinning from ear to ear. I had to stare at her for a moment. It was true: Nanami-san did look more mature in her kimono; some people might assume she wasn’t a high school student.

“Since we’re out and about, shall I take you to the various spots my wife and I went to on our date?” the driver asked.

“Wow, could you? Oh, but aren’t those places you want to keep to yourself, as memories with your wife?” Nanami-san asked.

“It’d make me happy if another young couple could see them. And besides, my wife and I have many other memories aside from our rickshaw ride.”

“If that’s the case, then we’d love to go,” Nanami-san replied. When both Nanami-san and I thanked him, the young man turned back toward us and nodded slightly with a smile on his face. Then, with that as the signal, the rickshaw picked up speed. Was it just me, or were we going even faster than before?

Anyhow, this man really was incredible. Even after learning we were in high school, he hadn’t changed his behavior toward us at all. I thought that maybe he’d speak more informally to us, but he continued to maintain his professional attitude. He was still pulling our rickshaw without getting out of breath, and, earlier, he’d supported the two of us with ease.

I raised my arm on the side opposite from Nanami-san and flexed slightly. The arm stretching out of the kimono was not at all like the arms I saw before me that were pulling the rickshaw. Sure, I had a bit of muscle, but when I compared my arm to his, mine was so much skinnier.

“What’s wrong, Yoshin?”

“Well, I couldn’t support you earlier, right? I thought that maybe I

should up my weights next time I work out.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. Even if we both fall down, as long as we don’t get hurt, it’ll just be a funny story.”

“Maybe so, but...”

I wasn’t feeling a sense of rivalry per se, but I was feeling bad that I hadn’t been able to support Nanami-san on my own earlier. That was why I couldn’t help comparing myself to the driver.

As I sat there wondering what I should do, I felt my cheeks being pinched again. Nanami-san was tugging at them, looking up at me from below.

“You’re always supporting me. Always,” she said. And with that, Nanami-san let go of my cheeks and smiled. I smiled sheepishly in response, even as I felt a sense of happiness spread throughout my body. If we weren’t in our current situation, I would have hugged her with all my might.

“Besides, you have to study. If you spend any more time working out, you’ll have less time for studying, am I right?”

“That’s very true.”

I couldn’t say anything after that. As I sat there discouraged with my head down, I thought I heard the young man in front of us laugh softly. When my expression changed to one of slight dejection, Nanami-san poked my cheeks again and giggled. And so our sightseeing on the rickshaw continued.

Grabbing Lunch during Our Trip

As we were walking side by side, taking in the sights, my stomach suddenly let out a growl. I’m sure I’d had a hearty breakfast at the hotel, but it seemed I’d gotten too excited from being on our trip. The sound my stomach made was much louder than usual.

I couldn’t help but laugh at the sound, but then I also heard Nanami-san’s stomach make a soft, adorable grumble. Nanami-san blushed slightly, but we both started laughing together.

“Well, what should we have for lunch?” Nanami-san asked.

“Is there anything you’d like to eat, Nanami-san?” I asked in return.

“Yup! I totally wanna get a hamburger!”

“Huh? You want hamburgers while on a trip?”

When I tilted my head, thinking we could eat hamburgers any time, Nanami-san wagged her index finger at me. The hem of her hakama swayed in unison with the movement of her hand.

“Well, well, well. Looks like you’re not in the know yet, Yoshin-kun. Didn’t you know there are hamburgers that you can eat *only* while you’re on a trip!”

“You’re really into that teacher character, aren’t you? Come on, you’re not even wearing your glasses right now, so you don’t have to pretend to push them up on your nose.”

Nanami-san seemed way more excited than usual from being on this trip. Each one of her gestures was one hundred times cuter than usual. *But a hamburger that you can only eat while you’re on a trip... Oh, I might have seen something like that on the internet.*

“You mean like a local specialty burger,” I suggested.

“Yes, that! I think there’s a restaurant close by. Let’s go check it out!”

Of course I’d heard of them before, but were they really that special? I’d only ever eaten burgers at chain restaurants, so the thought of them didn’t really click with me.

Even so, seeing Nanami-san in her mildly exhilarated state made my face break out into a smile, and I had to admit I was a little curious. Nanami-san seemed to know a place already, so there was no reason not to check it out.

With our lunch plans all set, Nanami-san took my hand and led us to the hamburger place. The joint was much larger than I’d expected, and there were many people lined up inside. Were they tourists like us? I’d seen people line up at ramen shops, but I’d never seen such a long line at a burger place before.

We took our spot at the end of the line, but since it was just the two of us, we arrived at the front of the line in no time. Nanami-san had taken her time trying to decide what to order, but we both ended up ordering the most popular combo. Our order was ready shortly after. Once we picked it up, we made our way toward a couple of open seats with a view of the ocean.

The water was reflecting the sunlight, and a ship was sailing across the surface. Eating hamburgers while looking at such a view made it feel like we’d come to a different country.

“Well then, shall we dig in?” I asked.

“Yes! I’m so excited!”

With that, Nanami-san opened her mouth wide—much wider than I would have imagined from her usual behavior—and chomped into her burger. I was mildly shocked by the sight, and I sat there staring at her with my eyes wide open.

I knew that it was bad manners to watch a woman while she ate, but I couldn’t help staring as Nanami-san opened her mouth wide yet again to take another bite out of her burger. Maybe because of that, I failed to properly bite my own. I ended up getting my mouth all dirty with the filling that came spilling out.

“Jeez, what are you doing, Yoshin? Look—you’ve got sauce all over the place.” Chuckling slightly, Nanami-san picked up a napkin

and cleaned off the sauce around my lips. I was incredibly embarrassed and felt like a complete child. “Oh, should I have cleaned it off with my finger and then licked my finger instead? Or maybe you’d have preferred me to just lick your face directly,” she said teasingly.

“No, no, no. Please don’t do that while we’re out in public,” I replied.

“Oh, I see. So you want me to do that at home, then.”

I was speechless at her response. My face grew hot enough for me to feel the change in temperature. “Y-Yeah. Maybe you can do that for me next time, then.”

That bluff was all I could muster in such a state, but it seemed to do the trick. Nanami-san’s face grew red as well.

With both our faces scarlet, we took long swigs of our cold drinks in a unified attempt to cool down our cheeks. Then, once she’d swallowed her drink, Nanami-san whispered, “Next time I get the chance.”

Even though we drank a good amount of our drinks, our cheeks remained red for quite some time.



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An Introvert's Hookup Hiccups: This Gyaruru Is Head Over Heels for Me! Volume 3
by Yuishi

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